

NORTH SUBURBS

Lot's closure curbs chances for thrifty downtown parking, 1B

Shoreview man on mission to find uncle's WWII aircrew, 1B



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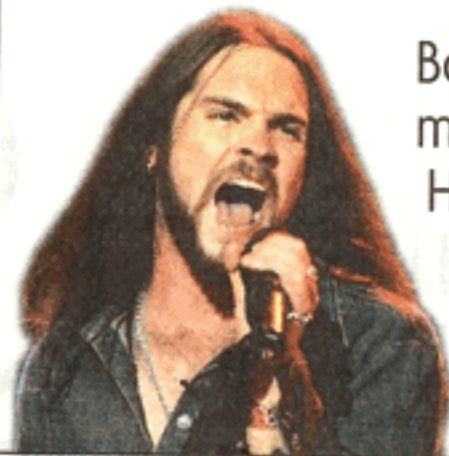
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MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

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Man on mission to find lost aircrew

Uncle shot down during World War II

BY MARY BAUER
Pioneer Press

John McCullough was an ordinary South Dakota farm boy who had never set foot out of the country before World War II. Had he made it home, he'd likely have become a rancher or farmer, perhaps in Minnesota, where some of his 12 siblings settled.

On June 25, 1944, McCullough and nine other airmen set out in their B-24 bomber to destroy a Japanese landing strip on a tiny Pacific island they'd never heard of. Enemy fighters rose from the island and blasted the unprotected six-plane formation.

Gunfire took out two engines on McCullough's plane and set the cockpit and bombardier compartments aflame. The plane pulled back into a complete loop before crashing into the water, Japanese fighters strafing all the way. No parachutes were seen.

"He went off to war and was lost, never accounted for, never searched for," said McCullough's nephew, Pat Ranfranz. "Yet now we know where he lies."

Ranfranz never met his uncle John, yet in some ways, John is the uncle he knows best. The Shoreview Web designer has become the unlikely champion of the missing aircrew, devoting countless hours of research to learning of the crew's fate and pinpointing its whereabouts.

In October, Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, will go to Yap Island in Micronesia to look for his uncle's B-24 lying in water up to 3,000 feet deep.

"We're hoping to find someone who says, 'We witnessed that shoot-down,' " he said.

Man on mission

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(continued)

"We're hoping for a lucky break."

Ranfranz stumbled onto his uncle's story while working on his senior thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 1989. While obtaining materials from the National Archives, he also requested information about his uncle, an assistant radio operator in the 13th Air Force, 307th Bomb Group.

When he received a report that gave details of the air raid, his mother's family was thrilled, despite the tragic ending, he said. Their brother's death had been a mystery, and for years they feared he had died a torturous death in a POW camp.

Then his uncle's story went dormant for more than a decade as Ranfranz pursued a career. He manages a Web site for AGS Publishing, but he's also a pilot and builds aviation-related Web sites on the side.

His most notable one is www.charleslindbergh.com, which gets half a million hits a year, and Lindbergh brought Ranfranz back to his uncle's story. Lindbergh trained U.S. fighter pilots in fuel conservation techniques to extend their range so that they could escort bomber missions like McCullough's.

That was enough to reignite Ranfranz's interest in his uncle. Last summer, he turned to a military records repository for more documents, which arrived en masse on microfiche. Web sites are magnets for leads, so in November he posted what he had on a new site, www.missingaircrew.com. The site touched a nerve with veterans who

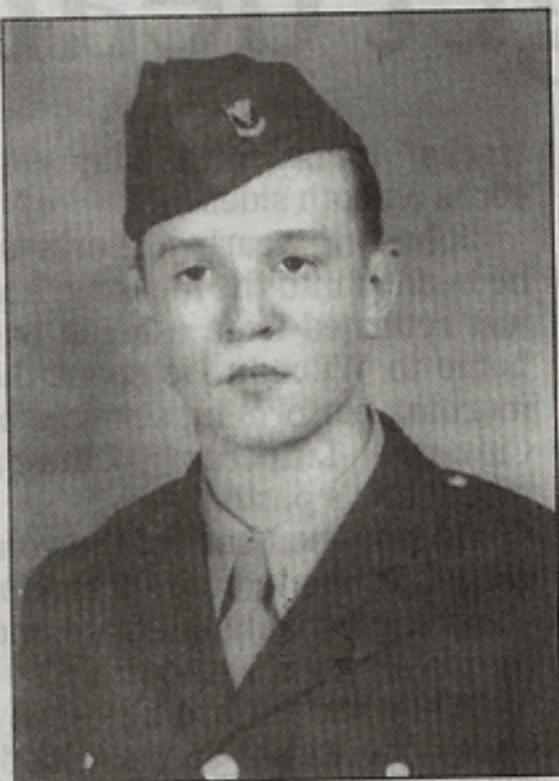
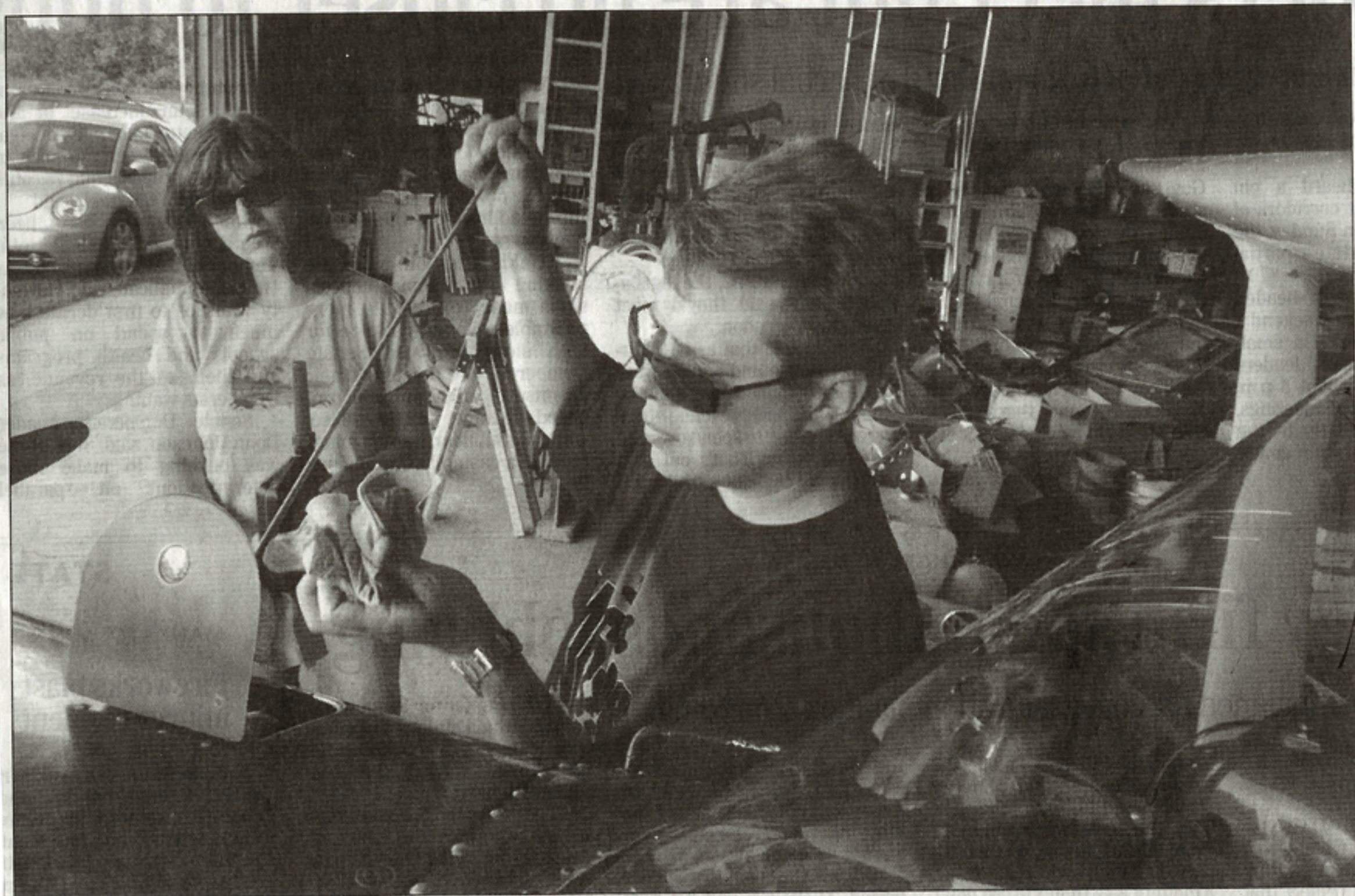


PHOTO COURTESY OF PAT RANFRANZ
"He went off to war and was lost, never accounted for, never searched for," Pat Ranfranz said of his uncle, John McCullough, shown in a military portrait. Ranfranz plans to mount a search.

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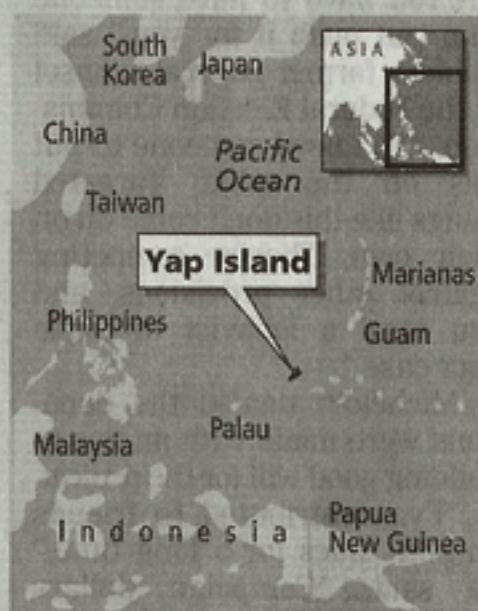
Left: Pat Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, check the oil in their Cessna 152 as they prepare for a flight from Anoka County airport. In October, the couple will go to Yap Island in Micronesia to look for his uncle's B-24, which was shot down during World War II.

The photo below shows the crew of the B-24 bomber in which Pat Ranfranz's uncle, John McCullough, flew during World War II. Ranfranz has identified all the crewmen in the top row; he is unsure if his uncle is in the bottom row or if the photo was taken before he joined the crew.

CHECK IT OUT

For more information on Pat Ranfranz's efforts to find his uncle's downed plane, go to www.missingaircrew.com.

Ranfranz is seeking contributions and a corporate sponsor for his October trip to Yap Island. You can contribute to his effort through the Web site, by purchasing T-shirts and baseball caps available at the site, or by writing to him at 3165 Victoria St., Shoreview, MN 55126.



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helped him learn more about the 307th Bomb Group and where to go for more documents.

The most rewarding part of his research has been contact with people who knew the crew members. In one case, Ranfranz's prodding reunited the navigator's siblings with his widow, from whom they were estranged. The family later gave Ranfranz boxes of letters from their brother.

"There were 10 guys lost, multiplied by the number of family members affected," Ranfranz said. "All these people are so into this and have such vivid memories."

The families, he said,

exposed him to a sea of yearning regarding World War II servicemen missing in action. According to the U.S. Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, 1,800 Americans remain unaccounted for from the Vietnam War and 8,000 from the Korean War. The missing from World War II dwarfs both at 78,000.

Ranfranz's hopes are high for the 10-day trip to Yap Island with his wife, but his expectations are realistic. Crude maps mark the crash site three to five miles southeast of the island, but the X could be more of a suggestion than a certainty.

"I don't have high hopes of finding the plane on this trip,

but I want to gather information. And it is possible to get lucky," he said, noting that another World War II plane was found when islanders told searchers exactly where the wreckage was. "My dream is to go out to that reef and look down and see it at the edge."

He will start by interviewing elders and villagers on Yap who know area reefs. He and his wife will dive to other known plane wreck sites and perform a

brief memorial near where his uncle's plane went down.

If they find the plane, the U.S. government likely would mount a recovery if it's feasible. But search efforts don't come cheap. Ranfranz expects his initial low-key effort will cost about \$8,000. Future searching with sonar and submersible watercraft would cost far more. He jokes that now would be a handy time to be a millionaire.

Yet he doesn't want to give up.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAT RANFRANZ

He's come to think of all the crew as family, and he wants to get them back where they belong, while they still have waiting families who remember them.

"None of those guys woke up that morning knowing anything about Yap," and that's not where they belong, he said. "I'd love to bring them home."

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