

Nephew gets closer to answers

*Trip to Yap Island pinpoints
World War II crash site*

by Katie Russie

Associate Editor

Pat Ranfranz has spent the past 20 years looking for information on his late uncle, John McCullough, who died off a small island in the Pacific Ocean near the end of World War II.

Last week the Shoreview resident returned from tiny Yap Island excited about new information he hopes will help him find his uncle's Coleman B-24 plane at long last.

"A week ago Monday we were probably darn close to the plane," Ranfranz said in an interview last Tuesday. He and his wife,

Cherie, spent two weeks interviewing Yapese elders, hacking through the jungle and diving in search of downed planes. They hope to return next year to continue the search.

McCullough, an Army Air Force technical sergeant, and nine others were in a Coleman B-24 that was shot down June 25, 1944, by Japanese during World War II. Families received little information on the crash, except that it occurred off Yap Island, somewhere in the Pacific. No search was ever made to recover the plane or crew.

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— Submitted photo

While searching for his uncle's plane, Pat Ranfranz found a World War II Hellcat crash site.

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Ranfranz said the trip exceeded his expectations.

"I never thought we'd be that well received. People in Yap, once they heard (about) my uncle ... They just opened up," he said.

Ranfranz had brought a written apology from a World War II veteran who knew McCullough. But Yapese elders told Ranfranz not to apologize for U.S. bombing of the island, saying the bombs landed mostly on the Japanese, who occupied Yap Island from 1919 until shortly before the end of World War II.

"They said they were pleased whenever the Americans came in because they knew that would help get rid of the Japanese," Ranfranz said.

Alex Tretnoff, a Yapese native whose parents came from Russia, provided the Ranfranzes with their best information yet on the crashed B-24. Forced to work in the fields for the Japanese, he often saw the action whenever the United States bombed the island.

"He saw my uncle's plane get shot down. He saw three parachutes go down, of which he saw two POWs get out," Ranfranz said. According to Tretnoff and other Yapese elders, the prisoners were taken to a

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nephew of WWII pilot

Japanese general known locally as Edward the Spy. Yapese believe the general was an American spy because he was always in a different location whenever the island was being bombed.

Yap native Mark Loochaz also witnessed the crash and saw two dark-haired American survivors. He said the POWs were taken to nearby Palau to be killed along with two priests. Ranfranz has since confirmed the deaths of both priests.

Being able to validate much of what the Yapese elders have told him strengthens Ranfranz' reliance on their eyewitness accounts. Tretnoff also told the couple of two other crash sites, both fighter Hellcats. The couple found the crash sites, along with graves for the pilots, exactly where Tretnoff remembered seeing the planes go down.

Other Yapese elders said no one had looked for the planes before. It's possible the Hellcat crews were listed as missing overseas, just as

Ranfranz' uncle was. If so, Ranfranz said he can now tell those families "what we would have loved to hear" — where their loved ones are buried.

The couple also found an engine and radio from what they believe to be a crashed F4U Corsair, one of the most famous World War II fighter jets and referred to by the Japanese as "Whistling Death." The couple found the plane 61 years to the day after it crashed.

As for their own search, Ranfranz said their interviews with Yapese elders have given them a specific location for the B-24 crash site.

"We now for the first time have eyewitnesses who say, 'I saw the plane sink, and here's exactly where it was,'" Ranfranz said. Tretnoff even gave the couple a precise water channel over which he remembers seeing the plane go down.

Yapese elders also participated in a memorial service Ranfranz and his wife held for McCullough and the other crew members. The service was taped, and copies will be mailed to families of the crew.

"This week meant so much," Ranfranz said. "Yap is one of the most beautiful places in the world, and the people are so cool." After getting a taste of the island's carefully protected ancient culture and seeing the breathtaking underwater world of sharks, manta rays

About Yap Island

- Located between Guam and Palau, east of the Philippine Islands. Main island consists of four volcanic islands spanning 39 square miles.
- Controlled by Japanese from 1919 until the end of World War II, when the United States took charge. Now part of the Federated States of Micronesia.
- Well-known for manta rays and stone money, with some stone pieces as large as 12 feet.
- Ancient culture, including traditional dances and men's and women's houses in each village, remains unchanged by tourism.
- Most islanders chew beetle nut, staining their teeth red.

and brightly colored fish, Ranfranz said he's at least glad that his uncle has had such a spectacular resting place.

People have called Ranfranz nonstop since he and his wife returned home a week ago. The couple hopes to return to Yap next July, hopefully with financial support from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command.

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