

Man finds clues to downed WWII plane

Uncle was aboard bomber over Pacific

BY MARY BAUER
Pioneer Press

A man who trekked to a tiny island in the Pacific to search for his uncle's downed World War II bomber has returned to Shoreview only to discover he was closer than he thought and that at least two crew members apparently made it to the island alive.

Before the jet lag had worn off, Pat Ranfranz was planning a return trip to Yap Island.

"I still have those dreams of diving down and seeing that B-24," Ranfranz said. "I know I'll see it in my lifetime, but I'm hoping it could happen next summer."

Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, are still sifting through reams of data and photos collected during their one-week stay in late October on Yap Island, where an airstrip made it a favorite target during World War II. Ranfranz's uncle John McCul-

lough and nine other crew members were aboard a B-24 shot down there on June 25, 1944.

The Shoreview Web designer has become the unlikely champion of the missing crew, devoting countless hours of research to uncovering their fate and bringing them home.

Ranfranz had his work cut out for him from the moment he landed. Turns out, World War II planes litter Yap Island — some in plain sight and a few with live bombs still aboard. Submerged aircraft are favorite dive spots.

The Yapanese are nonchalant about living in a military plane graveyard, but the Ranfranzes sparked curiosity. Most tourists come to see well-known Japanese wrecks. The Ranfranzes were in uncharted territory.

The couple worked non-stop, scuba diving, hacking

WWII PLANE, 2B



PHOTO COURTESY CHERIE AND PAT RANFRANZ

Pat Ranfranz and his guide, Theo, examine a large American engine they initially thought could have been from Ranfranz's uncle's B-24. After examining the engine serial numbers and other crash-site pieces, they determined the wreckage was from an F4U Corsair that crashed Oct. 23, 1944.



MIKE VEITCH, BIGBLUEIMAGES.COM

Pat Ranfranz examines an open hatch on an American landing craft destroyed off the coast of Yap Island during World War II. The couple drove around the island in search for the bomber plane carrying Ranfranz's uncle. His wife, Cherie, watches from behind.

WWII plane

(continued)

with machetes through jungles and mangrove swamps, and braving tropical creepy-crawlies like biting centipedes. They suffered cuts, bruises and a nasty fire coral sting.

"We weren't there to sit by the pool," Ranfranz said.

Yap is a closed society, meaning Ranfranz needed an introduction before approaching private citizens, particularly elders. A former American running a hotel smoothed the way, scouring the island for witnesses and lining up interviews.

"At first people were leery and hesitant," Ranfranz said. "But once they understood what you were about, they opened up."

As their story spread, an entourage of residents and tourists started asking for updates.

"People would come up to us at dinner and ask, 'What did you find today?' " Ranfranz said.

And almost every day turned up something. One elder reported seeing a plane shot down that was "the color of money." McCullough's bomber, so new it hadn't been painted, was bright silver.

But the elder's descriptions were off target. Bombers are lumbering giants with a distinct rumble heard long before they come into view. She heard the sudden screaming of a fighter.

Another lead took them to an engine deep in the brush they thought could be from the B-24.

"When we thought that engine was from the B-24, it was like you could bridge time," Cherie Ranfranz said.

"I really wanted that engine to be our B-24," her husband said.

It was not. The plane was likely a Corsair.

"The whole week was so adrenaline-filled," Ranfranz said. "It was this perpetual cycle of, 'Where does this lead?' "

The witness who, in retrospect, haunts them is Alex Tretnoff, the son of Russian



CRAIG BORCK, PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

Pat Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, check the oil in their Cessna 152 as they prepare for a flight at Anoka County airport. Ranfranz is obsessed with finding the WWII plane that went down June 25, 1944, with his uncle and other crew members off Yap Island.

CHECK IT OUT

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

Airfare to Yap Island is expensive, up to \$3,000 per ticket. Future efforts may require underwater cameras or sonar. If you'd like to donate frequent-flyer miles or cash, contact Ranfranz through his Web site or e-mail him at webmaster@missingaircrew.com.

immigrants. Tretnoff, who grew up on Yap and witnessed much of the war's carnage, said he watched a B-29 shot down just off the island.

Ranfranz thought it was possible his witness was confusing a B-29 with a B-24, but Tretnoff insisted he knew his aircraft. And his descriptions of two Hellcat crashes accurately directed Ranfranz to one nearly intact plane and to the engine of another. Slow Internet access deterred Ranfranz's attempts to check the story. He had to take Tretnoff's word for it.

The couple returned to Minnesota on Oct. 28, but Ranfranz didn't let up. He posted photos and information on his Web site, www.missingaircrew.com, hoping war buffs would help identify engine parts.

Ranfranz quickly learned that B-29s never bombed Yap, which early in the war was beyond the fuel range for most bombers. The only bomber ever shot down at

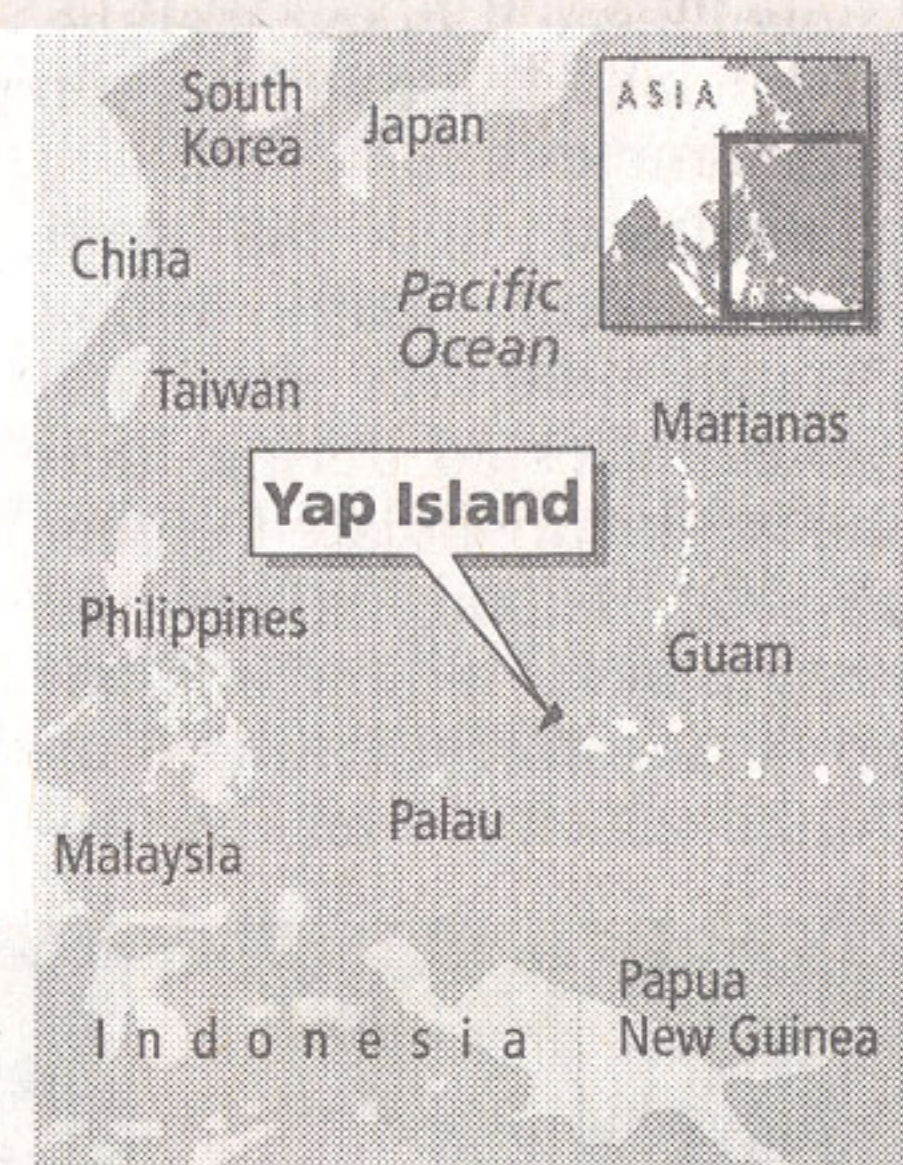
Yap was McCullough's B-24. Tretnoff had been describing his uncle's plane.

Another islander had reported seeing three parachutes emerge from the bomber. One man swam away from the island, his fear of the Japanese greater than that of the sea. Two men came ashore, where islanders say they were captured and interrogated. Shortly afterward, the two Americans, a Filipino family and two Catholic priests were sent to Palau and executed.

Back home, Ranfranz confirmed the identities and fates of the two priests and realized his uncle may have survived the crash. But that summoned images of torture for a man Ranfranz has come to know intimately through his search.

"At first, I was excited, but now I hope he died in the plane," he said.

Together, the two clues point to his uncle's plane. The



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Ranfranzes dove in the area Tretnoff indicated just once near the end of their stay. They were close.

Ranfranz is saving his pennies for a return next summer. He is unwavering in his quest to bring the crew members home.

The day before they left Yap, the Ranfranzes joined officials and hotel staff for an emotional memorial service, in which Pat read out the names of the crew and Cherie threw flowers into the water.

"I feel I know these guys," he said. "If Martin Unger (a crew member) walked in here, I think I could have a conversation with him. It is a quest."

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