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— Submitted photo

Patrick Ranfranz' uncle, John McCullough (far left) was killed in action during World War II. Ranfranz' mother, Marie (right), was the family's youngest child.

Man seeks answers in Pacific

*History, flight aficionado searches for uncle's
crashed World War II plane*

by Katie Russie

Associate Editor

One look around the AGS Publishing office belonging to Patrick Ranfranz confirms the Shoreview resident's love for flying. Miniature planes, photos of planes and a display honoring the historical accomplishments of Charles Lindbergh fill each corner of the small room.

"Anything to do with aviation and flying keeps my stress down," said Ranfranz, a private pilot. On the morning of the Press interview he had taken a co-worker for a 5

a.m. flight over Shoreview in his two-seater Cessna.

Ranfranz also maintains several Web sites, his most popular being Charles Lindbergh.com.

A lesser-known Web site of his, MissingAirCrew.com, begs a story. An aficionado of both flight and history, Ranfranz found the perfect combination in his search for a World War II plane that was shot down in 1944 with his uncle, Army Air Force Tech. Sgt. John McCullough, and nine others on board.

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"If you bring up history and aviation together, that mix can keep me going forever," Ranfranz said.

Growing up, he knew little about his uncle except rumors of his death. Thousands of U.S. soldiers died during the war, and details of specific incidents were sketchy. A Western Union telegram dated July 7, 1944, stated simply that he was killed in action over Yap Island June 22 of that year. The family never learned more, and for years McCullough's father in particular held onto hope that his son, whose body was never recovered, would return.

Ranfranz started looking for clues 20 years ago while in college. Through his search for the missing Coleman B-24, he hopes to unearth the truth about the crash and bring closure for the families.

"Every day literally ... we find something new," he said. He enjoys telling the crew's individual stories and hopes to bring a factual finish to their life history rather than rumors.

Piecing history

McCullough was the fifth of 13 children, and Ranfranz' mother, Marie, was the youngest. The family moved from South Dakota to California shortly after World War II began. Older siblings either joined the military or worked in a Goodyear plant making bullet-sealing fuel tanks for planes. The younger children helped out with the family's Victory Garden.

McCullough joined the Army Air Force in April 1943 and graduated from technical school on Thanksgiving Day, becoming an assistant radio operator.

Nearly a year later the family received word of his death. Ranfranz said his mother, 5 years old at the time, remembers standing in the doorway watching the adults cry.

No search was conducted for the bodies of the missing air crew, believed to have been shot down over Yap Island, east of the Philippines in the Pacific Ocean.

Ranfranz' personal search has unearthed key pieces of information, including clues that two crew members might have survived the crash. Unfortunately, said Ranfranz, the Japanese on the island



— Submitted photo

While seeking information on his uncle's downed plane, Patrick Ranfranz reunited navigator Martin Unger's widow, Cecile, with Unger's two sisters. The three had been estranged for 60 years.

habitually killed survivors from downed planes rather than taking prisoners.

He also discovered that his uncle's plane was new out of the factory and had not yet been painted. That could explain why the Japanese targeted that particular plane out of the formation of six, Ranfranz said. Perhaps they thought the plane, different from the others, carried high-ranking U.S. officials.

The plane's unique color should make the search easier; of seven B-24s known to have crashed off the reef of the tiny island, McCullough's was the only silver one. Any natives seeing a silver plane go down or silver debris wash up on the shore likely saw the remains of the very plane Ranfranz hopes to find.

Ranfranz delves into historical research with the same gusto he gives to flying. He reads every book he can on all the U.S. presidents and wars. The same passion holds true for his search for his uncle's plane. In addition to book research, he has met with siblings, friends, fellow military personnel and others who knew the missing crew members.

"I have now a new extended family," Ranfranz said. "It's something that always bonds us together."

He spent nearly eight hours one day listening to one of his uncle's military pals, whose wife said he rarely talked about the war until then. He's discov-

ered the answer to many nagging questions on his uncle's death, enlightening relatives at family reunions and trading rumors for concrete history.

"They're just thrilled that someone's actually paying attention," he said of the crew's family and friends.

His work also reunited navigator Martin Unger's widow and two sisters. The three had been estranged since Unger's death. They met together in New York City last month — joined for dinner by Ranfranz — for the first time in 60 years.

On to Yap Island

U.S. and Japanese reports gave details of the crash, but no on-site search has yet been made for the plane or crew members. Ranfranz' research and lobbying have convinced the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command to reopen the case, much to the delight of the crew's families.

Ranfranz plans to visit Yap Island later this month and interview islanders who might have seen the plane crash. After pinpointing where the plane went down, he will dive in hopes of spotting it.

Once Ranfranz locates the plane, JPAC will provide resources to recover the crew. Ranfranz already has spent thousands of his own dollars to obtain records, old newspaper clippings and information on the crew and its fate. Most of the expenses for traveling to Yap Island will come out of his pocket as well, although he has solicited help from a few sponsors.

Ranfranz' wife of 18 years, Cherie, will accompany him. A detail-oriented reader, she has contributed to his discoveries.

"She's as passionate about it as I am," he said. She is working on getting her private pilot's license and recently became diver-certified so she can join him in the underwater search for the plane.

Whether they find the plane during this initial trip or not, Ranfranz plans to perform a memorial service near the crash site. Helping him will be traditional Yapanese chiefs, whom he said appreciated U.S. help in rooting out Japanese soldiers on the island. The ceremony will be taped and sent home to relatives of the crew.

"We want to give (families) a closure of a memorial service whether we find the plane or

not," Ranfranz said. He added that most family members close to the crew are older and want closure on the crash before they die.

Ranfranz' passion in his search extends to doing what's right for the crew members, none of whom belong at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean near an island they didn't know, he said.

"Essentially, time kind of stopped for them. They were forgotten," Ranfranz said.

Not anymore.

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