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Posted on Mon, Jul. 04, 2005

Nephew looks for answers after uncle shot down in WWII

Associated Press

SHOREVIEW, Minn. - A Web designer will go to the other side of the world this fall to look for an uncle he never met, who died during World War II near a tiny Pacific island that most people have never heard of.

"He went off to war and was lost, never accounted for, never searched for," said Pat Ranfranz, the nephew of assistant radio operator John McCullough. "Yet now we know where he lies."

On June 25, 1944, McCullough and nine other airmen set out in their B-24 bomber to destroy a Japanese landing strip on the island of Yap. About 90 seconds after the bombs hit, Japanese fighters rose up and carved into the six-plane formation.

McCullough's plane pulled back and did a complete loop before crashing into the water. Two of its engines were destroyed by gunfire. The cockpit was on fire. Military records show no parachutes were seen as the plane sped downward.

Ranfranz discovered his uncle's story while working on his senior thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 1989. Since then, he had devoted countless hours of research to learning the crew's fate and pinpointing the downed plane.

With a rough idea of where the plane crashed, Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, will go to Yap Island in Micronesia in October to look for the B-24, which may be in up to 3,000 feet of water.

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

He said the most rewarding part of his research into the crash was getting to know some people who knew the crew members, who were part of the 13th Air Force, 307th Bomb Group.



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"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 taught him that thousands of families still yearn to learn what happened to loved ones during World War II. According to the U.S. Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, 78,000 American remain unaccounted from that war.

Ranfranz said he's realistic about the chances of success for the 10-day trip. There are amateurish maps that put the crash site three to five miles southeast of Yap, but they could be wrong.

"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.

He said another WWII plane was found when islanders pinpointed the wreckage for searchers. "My dream is to go out to that reef and look down and see it at the edge," he said.

The trip will cost about \$8,000, and that only covers the simple search techniques of interviewing local residents and diving along the reef. Searching with sonar and submarines would be much more expensive.

Still, if he finds the plane the U.S. government would probably launch a recovery operation, so Ranfranz said he won't give up.

"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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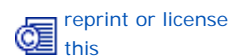
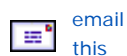
Pat Ranfranz' Web site: <http://www.missingaircrew.com/>

Information from: St. Paul Pioneer Press, <http://www.twincities.com>

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