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# Man's search for WWII crash provides closure for WW woman

The ceremony in Yap will be a formal recognition in honor of Holding and the two other pilots who died that day.

By **ANDY PORTER**  
of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

**WALLA WALLA** — It was a "routine Sunday morning" on the last weekend in June and there was a message on Terri Trick's phone.

The voice on the recording was from Pat Ranfranz of Shoreview, Minn. What he said took Trick's breath away.

"We've found your uncle's plane," Ranfranz said.

Trick, a Walla Walla resident, immediately called Ranfranz back. As a result she's flying to the South Pacific this week to honor her uncle, Howard Holding, and put closure to a mystery more than six decades old.

It was Sept. 6, 1944, a Wednesday, and Holding was one of three U.S. Navy pilots lost that day raiding Yap island, then a Japanese stronghold in World War II.

Other fliers in the attack

reported Holding's F6F-5 Hellcat apparently crashed after being struck by another plane that had been hit by ground fire. Recovery of any remains was impossible then and searchers who came after the war also found nothing. Holding, who was Trick's uncle from her mother's side, had vanished.

Trick hadn't been born when her uncle died, but grew up hearing about him.

"He was something of a legend in our family," she said. "My mother and grandmother always had a picture of him on the dresser ... Nobody ever got over his death in my family."

Enter Ranfranz, who was on his own quest to find an uncle lost over Yap in World War II.

Twenty-year old Technical Sgt. John R. McCollough was a crewman aboard a B-24 shot down during a bombing mission in June 1944. Like Trick, Ranfranz also grew up hearing stories about an uncle who was shot down and never recovered.

"I've always had a strong interest in history and aviation therefore, the story of my lost uncle stayed with me," Ranfranz wrote on his "Missing Air Crew"



U-B photo by **ANDY PORTER**

At her Walla Walla home, Terri Trick shows a photo of her uncle, Howard Holding, a U.S. Navy pilot who died in World War II during an attack on Yap Island. After more than six decades, the crash site has been identified and Trick will travel to Yap to take part in a ceremony to honor her uncle.

website. In 1988, after graduating with a degree in history from the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, he began searching in earnest for his lost uncle.

Starting in 2005, Ranfranz

made the first of a series of trips to Yap to look for "the Coleman crew," named after the B-24's pilot, Gerald D. Coleman. During his first expedition he found

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# ✓Discovery brings closure

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the crash site of one of the three Hellcats that went down on the island in September 1944. Then in 2006 he and others found the remains of the other two planes, one on land and one in the island's harbor.

The Hellcat in the harbor was Holding's, but determining that took some detective work, Ranfranz said in a phone interview.

"It's been a process of elimination," he said. At first, they weren't able to identify what kind of airplane it was, but with the aid of other aviation buffs "later that year we knew it was one of the three Hellcats that went down that day."

Evidence found at the two crash sites on land identified those planes as belonging to the other pilots who died in the raid, Ensign Joseph E. Cox and Lt. j.g. Harry Brown. "So I had a good guess in 2006 or 2007 that the plane in the water was Holding's,"

## ON THE NET

[www.missingaircrew.com](http://www.missingaircrew.com)

Ranfranz said.

Although his research had given him Holding's name and home town, Salt Lake City, it wasn't until 2009 Ranfranz learned about Identifinders International, a company that specializes in forensic genealogy. He contacted the company and it agreed to try to find any of Holding's surviving family members free of charge.

The result was Ranfranz calling Trick on that last Sunday in June.

"My heart just took a leap and my stomach lurched and I had to sit down and I said, 'Oh my God, after all these years,'" Trick said about her reaction.

"He was only 22 when he died. The last time (the family) saw him was in November of 1943 when he came home on leave before deploying," she recalled.

After Holding's death, the only information they received was that "he had been shot down in the Pacific near Yap island. And my grandmother always said, 'They'll never find his plane.'"

The ceremony in Yap will be a formal recognition in honor of Holding and the two other pilots who died that day. Trick said she will be accompanied by her brother, Brent Jacob of Utah, and is looking forward to meeting Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie.

As for the issue of closure, "that's something I've found amazingly comforting. The sense of peace," she said.

Nearly all of the family members from her uncle's generation, including her mother, father and grandmother, have died without knowing what happened to the young man who went away to fight a war and never returned.

"Now we know," Trick said.