

# History detective

## Rochester man works to recover untold stories of sacrifice

By Matthew Stolle

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There is an almost mystical connection that bonds Pat Ranfranz to a tiny island in the western Pacific.

By the scale of most World War II theaters, Yap Island has rated little more than a footnote in most histories. Yet Ranfranz's connection to the island is personal. It was over Yap that Ranfranz's uncle, John R. McCollough, was shot down during a bombing run more than 65 years ago.

And it has become Ranfranz's all-consuming passion to identify his uncle and many of the estimated 110 servicemen lost there during the war.

Born and raised in Rochester, Ranfranz, 44, and his wife, Cherie, have made four trips to the island, and another is planned for late July, this time to begin to memorialize the crash sites that Ranfranz has identified so far with markers.

The marble markers were donated by Bud Janzen, owner of LMT Laserworks in Rochester and an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan. The first marker will be dedicated on July 27 in honor of Joseph Cox, an Idaho native whose Hellcat was shot down over Yap on Sept. 6, 1944.

Among those attending the ceremony will be Cox's 90-year-old brother, Ellis Cox. Plans to memorialize five other sites with markers are also under way.

They are the first concrete testimonials of the sacrifices of a group of service members whose identities had nearly faded into obscurity. Many of the men lost over Yap were in their early 20s. All lived with the day-to-day reality that their next mission could be their last.

They also represent a small portion of the 78,000 World War II servicemen listed as killed or missing in action.

"You keep on thinking about what they were thinking on these (missions) as 20, even 19-year-old men over the Pacific," said Ranfranz. "I think they were all probably scared, especially when they got over the island."

Diving in waters off Yap and hacking through jungle, Ranfranz says he has "completely identified" eight of the the estimated 35 crash sites on and around Yap. Although he has yet to find his uncle's B-24 Liberator bomber, his faith that he will one day do so remains unshaken.

Reports indicate that McCullough's plane was hit and last seen falling toward the water in a flat spin. All 10 men aboard the plane were presumed dead.

"We've done a lot of dives out there. I saw something orange there a few years ago. Life rafts were orange. It was a couple hundred feet below me," Ranfranz said.

Until his first trip to Yap, much of the plane wreckage scattered across the island was regarded by the Yapese as little more than the detritus of war, mere junk. Yapese residents told Ranfranz that as children, they often played around the sites that in some cases contained human remains and bones.

Through Ranfranz's efforts, the stories of these planes and the men who flew them are now being told.

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Ranfranz on Yap Island

PHILIPPINE ISLANDS  
Mindanao

Pacific Ocean

YAP

Caroline Islands

Marianas

Guam