

# 'Remembering the missing'

By Matt Stolle

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Fragment by fragment and plane by plane, Rochester native Pat Ranfranz has been retrieving from the shadows the service members and airmen who were shot down over Yap Island during World War II, including his uncle, John R. McCullough, who disappeared in 1944.

His reconstructions have been built around some good old-fashioned sleuthing. He has interviewed Yapese chiefs, who were able to provide proximate locations to downed planes. Using after-action reports recovered from dusty military archives, he has been able to find letters and eye-witness accounts of how the planes were lost.

"To me, it's like holding letters from Caesar. It's history that probably would have been lost if I had not collected it," said Ranfranz, who has also been able to connect with the gray-ing relatives of lost servicemen through his website Missing Air Crew.

Part of the Federated States of Micronesia, Yap didn't figure as prominently as other islands during the "island-hopping" strategy employed by U.S. forces. The idea was to attack some islands while letting others wither on the vine. Yap was never invaded by U.S. forces, but it was the target of numerous bombing runs aimed at destroying Japanese airfields that could potentially threaten the U.S. fleet.

Adding to the danger U.S. pilots faced was the fact that the Japanese had reinforced the island with extra fighters, who mounted frontal attacks on American bombers as they flew over the island. Many of the bombing raids originated from airfields or carriers six and seven hours away. That meant that they often arrived unescorted by fighters that couldn't fly that distance and were thus exposed to enemy fighters.

"(The Japanese fighters) were waiting for them. As soon as they ended their bombing run, the fighters came in," Ranfranz said.

Ranfranz developed a fascination with his uncle early in life, fueled by stories told by his mom of how the family learned of McCullough's fate: From a Western Union employee on a bicycle bearing a telegram of his loss. As a student at Sunset Terrace Elementary School, Ranfranz would spin the globe around until Yap Island fell into view.

But it wasn't until his first trip to Yap in 2005 that the scope of Ranfranz's project widened with the realization that many more service members than just his uncle disappeared



Submitted photo

**Rochester native Patrick Ranfranz visits a wreck site on Yap Island.**

over Yap. During expeditions on the island, Ranfranz ran across the wreckage of several other planes, including that of Cox, whose memorial will be dedicated this month.

Ranfranz, who has been working in league with the Yapese Visitors Bureau, said officials there see the benefit of establishing memorial sites around the island as a way to draw tourists. Plus, the Yapese's belief in ghosts has endowed the sites with a spiritual significance since Ranfranz began his work there five years ago.

Ranfranz's own experiences in Yap have exposed him to some disheartening realities about the United State's commitment to its service members. And one idea that has fallen by the wayside is the notion that the U.S. never leaves behind a man in war.

Two years since the remains of another pilot, Lt. Harry Brown, were found by Ranfranz and reported to U.S. Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, the agency has yet to recover them.

"I choke whenever I'm watching the the nightly news and a Pentagon spokesman gets on and says, 'We never leave a man behind.' They do it all the time," Ranfranz said.

He said his efforts at identifying fallen service members around Yap have largely been greeted with indifference by the joint U.S. agency. But recently they have been seeking more information from him.

Ranfranz compares his endeavor to a marathon. Even if he were to find his uncle, his intention is to persevere in his search for the lost service members on Yap.

"The main point is remembering the missing," Ranfranz said.