

IN THE SKIES ABOVE YAP
The Missing Air Crew.

Prepared by Svetlana Murashkina.
Photography: Pat Ranfranz, Missing Air Crew Project.
Underwater photography: Mike Veitch.
Photographs of Yap Island during World War II – US National Archives.

The Missing Air Crew project and website are dedicated to the memory of ten crewmembers of the American B-24 aircraft under Coleman's command (Coleman B-24 Crew¹), shot down by a Japanese fighter plane above coastal waters near Yap Island and declared missing on June 25, 1944.

“My uncle, Instructor Sergeant John McCallah, was the assistant radio operator on board. And despite the fact that it has been 60 years since the loss of the aircraft, it's never too late to begin the search. The family members of the perished crew have the right to know where their loved ones rest. 78,000 American soldiers that fought in World War II are still considered missing in action. Their bodies were never found, and their relatives don't even know the exact location of where they died. This website is a means to uncover more about the lives and times of Coleman's crew. And to find a plane!” – Patrick Ranfranz – the author of the Missing Air Crew project.

PROLOGUE

On the morning of June 25, 1944 Coleman's B-24J Liberator (US Air Force, #44-40598), which was participating in military action above the Pacific Ocean as part of the 13th Group, 372nd Squadron, 307th Bomb Group, took off the Mokerang Airfield in Los Negros (part of the Bismarck archipelago) with 10 crewmembers on board. According to the plan, this was a 13-hour mission to a well defended target without fighter plane support that was supposed to conclude with the return to the same base.

A minute and a half after dropping bombs on the island's airfield defended by the Japanese, Coleman's B-24 was attacked by the enemy (Japanese) interceptor aircraft and suffered direct hits on engines 2 and 3.

The pilot and bomb aimer cockpits caught fire and the flames blazed through the bullet riddled windshields. The airplane did a loop, rolled onto its right wing and then having gone into a spin crashed into the water two miles south of the landing strip. The Liberator continued to be under attack during the fall and even after it fell about 3 to 5 miles southeast of the southern tip of Yap Island. Not one parachute was seen separating from the plane and it was concluded that none of the crewmembers survived. The tail gunner of another B-24, Sergeant Edward Martin, was the last who saw Coleman's plane in the air, or more precisely, how it fell into the water.

The crew is considered missing in action and its members are included on the List of missing in action in the American cemetery in Manila, Philippines.

¹ Gerald Dwight Coleman, the US Air Force pilot, commander of the B-24J Liberator, was born in 1917, died on June 25, 1944. The B-24J Liberator was the main model of the high-speed, multi-engine, multi-seater heavy bomber with a moderate bombload and a good range – the most widely mass produced of all American military aircraft of World War II. Maiden flight in 1939, entered service in 1940.

WORLD WAR II ON YAP ISLAND

The island of Yap has been in the sphere of interest of different developed nations for time immemorial (since ancient times). By the beginning of World War II the island was in the hands of Japan, which received a mandate to govern Mariana, Caroline and Marshall islands (except for Guam). The Japanese fortified Yap and used it during the war as a naval and air force base. The island was part of the defense communication lines created by Japan in the Pacific Ocean.

On the dawn of June 15, 1944 the American marines made a landing on Saipan to engage the enemy with the purpose of making the territory of Japan reachable by the American B-29s². More than two weeks before the marine landings the Liberators of the 13th group based in Los Negros bombed Truk in order to neutralize the strategic Japanese base and thus prevent them from establishing air superiority over Saipan. A large expeditionary Japanese corps, estimated to be over 40 ships, was observed some distance north of Yap on June 19, 1944. Japanese airplanes taking off the aircraft carriers' decks did not spare the powerful ships of the Pacific US Navy, which supported the Allied land forces on Saipan.

The airplanes had to fly over 1000 miles from their base in Los Negros to strike the Japanese military ships that provided protection for the naval troops and fuel for the bay of Yap. On June 22, 33 Liberators were in the skies above Yap Island during the longest mission in the history of the 13th group. However, no enemy ships were detected. The weight of the load forced the American bombers toward their second most important target, the Yap airfield. The 33-ton bombs destroyed the airstrip and the adjacent area with stunning success. The Japanese were caught off guard. Not even one of the 40 planes was able to take to the air. 19 planes were destroyed, 15 suffered damages. The airstrip was dug up with craters and rendered useless. During the 6 days after the raid the Liberators were ironing out Yap, not allowing the airstrip to be put back in order and used by planes flying from the Philippines to Mariana Islands to bomb the defenders of Saipan, who found themselves in a tough situation.

Coleman's crew flew one of the B-24s...

THE BEGINNING OF THE SEARCH

Pat Ranfranz began the search for his uncle John and his companions, the members of Coleman's crew, in 1998 while he was finishing his education in history at a university in Wisconsin. The stories about the uncle whose plane was shot down not too far from Yap Island in Micronesia during the Second World War and never found existed in the family since childhood. Pat was always fascinated with aviation and military history and could let go of neither the enigma that was his uncle's death nor of the thought of the far away Yap Island, a dot on the globe known for its unique stone money.

John Raymond McCallah was born in 1923. He was one of 13 children in the family of farmers in South Dakota. In 1942, soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the family moved to California so they could contribute to the military industrialization of the country. Pat's mother (John's sister) was then 5 years old, and John was 19. He worked in the Good Year Tire Co. factory in Los Angeles right up until April 1943 when he was drafted into the Army. In the

² B-29 Superfortress – American strategic bomber developed in the early 1940s. It is considered to be the best strategic bomber operating during World War II. The B-29 became world famous when in August 1945 airplanes of this kind participated in the atomic bombardment of the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

beginning of 1944, after finishing his radio school on Thanksgiving Day (middle of October), the young sergeant went across the ocean to serve in the 372nd Squadron, 307th Bomb Group. John was awarded the medal for service in the Air Force (“*Air Force Distinguished Service Medal*”?) with an oak leaf cluster and the “Purple Heart”. He died on June 25, 1944 at the age of 20 in the skies above Yap Island while carrying out a military mission...

While studying for his diploma, Pat was also working with the military archives and even contemplated studying the history of his uncle’s military unit and its crew. However, the information from the archives was arriving very slowly and as a result he wrote and defended the thesis entitled “Development of Military Power”, which looked into the low altitude attacks of the B-24 heavy bombers on the German oil refineries in Ploiești, Romania on August 1, 1943. These explorations helped in the understanding of the role of the B-24 in the air war above Europe and the Pacific Ocean. At the same time the documents from the military archives about Coleman’s crew started to arrive. In the winter of 1989 the Missing Air Crew (MACR #10023) report came in. It was then for the first time that the family found out who were the other crewmembers and received a complete account of how the airplane was shot down. After this, the relatives found a telegram that Pat’s grandfathers received in July 1944. The telegram stated that John was missing in action and most likely died. Even though the family lost only one son, the grandfather could not forgive the Japanese. Like many other families they hoped that John survived and will at some point return home. But time passed, nothing happened, and the “missing in action/died” status didn’t change.

The United States government spent billions of dollars in order to return the bodies of its citizens to the homeland. Between 1948 and 1952 hundreds of bodies of American soldiers were returned from the other side of the ocean for burying. The military commission went through the cases of every missing soldier and closed them only when the body was considered unobtainable. Pat’s mother’s family did not know that Coleman’s case was also reviewed in 1948 and despite the fact that the location of where the airplane went down was approximately known (somewhere 3 – 5 miles south from the southeastern tip of Yap Island) it was concluded that the crew and the plane could not be raised because of the considerable depth.

So Pat Ranfranz took up the case himself and started looking for historical documents, people, and the airplane before they all get forgotten in time. The created by him MissingAirCrew.com received numerous responses and a huge flow of information from military historians, relatives of the fallen, witnesses; documents were also being received from official sources. Together with his wife Sherry they spend countless hours looking through microfilms, files and photographs.

THE FIRST EXPEDITION TO YAP, SEPTEMBER 2005

The trip to the scene of battle, Yap Island, was planned a long time ago. In 2004 with the development of the MissingAirCrew.com website it was decided to conduct the search of the airplane by themselves, no matter what the cost. Pat began diving while still in college but before the trip in 2005 he went through another course. Sherry also received instruction.

Cindy Harris, the travel coordinator for the Micronesian Divers Association (MDA), and Bill Acker, the owner and executive director of the dive resort “Manta Ray Bay and Yap Divers” on Yap Island, helped plan the expedition.

Bill and his enthusiastic colleagues became irreplaceable participants of the expedition and helped in searches on land as well as underwater. Carrying out scouting expeditions and

gathering information about the possible impact site by asking the older Yapese who lived on the island during World War II – until it is too late since it is rare for someone on Yap to live until they are 80 – became the main goal. The daily dives were planned despite having slim chances of finding the plane because the data of its whereabouts was approximate. They made 2 dives every morning, were back by noon, and then went into villages to talk to the elders. The personnel of “Manta Ray Bay” were very helpful – they searched, including among their own relatives, and helped find witnesses.

The week spent on Yap Island in October 2005 was intense and although the prized plane was not found the results were inspiring: the remains of three American planes were found, two deck fighters Grumman F6F Hellcat³ and an F4U Corsair⁴, which was initially taken to be a part of a B-24. One of the older Yapese recounted how he helped pull the body of an American pilot from a Hellcat and bury him on the mountainside not too far from the crash site. The same old man told how the body of another Hellcat pilot, dragged by the Japanese from one of the downed planes, was violated. This information was handed over to the official organizations in the US and there is hope that the names of the pilots will be reestablished.

The intention to widen the mission and investigate all American wrecks on Yap and around the island in order to provide the families with details about the deaths of their relatives came naturally. The remembrance service in honor of Coleman’s crew was held on October 26, 2005 on the bow of the schooner “The Mnuv” in Yap bay. New friends gathered for this ceremony: land and underwater guides and officials from Yap and Micronesia.

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

After coming back from Yap, it again became the time of inquiries, offers and intense searches through the archives. In 2005 a list of all American airplanes lost in the skies of Yap was successfully compiled⁵.

This helped establish that the discovered bomber belonged to Anthony’s crew⁶ and also receive accurate information regarding the location of Coleman’s plane. Mark Swank, an investigator from Washington D.C., presented codes from a submarine, which patrolled the waters near Yap Island during the air raids. That morning, June 25, 1944, the USS ALBACORE (SS 218 – lost on 11/7/1944) monitored how the bombers approached Yap and bombed the island. The submarine was forced to dive often because of a Japanese airplane above. Just as the first explosions thundered above and the flames soared on Yap, the submarine received a communication about two B-24s falling into the sea and sinking. They were the Coleman’s crew, south of the Yap air strip, and another, 95 miles away not far from Soral Island.

Unfortunately for Pat’s uncle’s crew, the submarine went to the rescue of the plane that fell near Soral and did not come back to Yap until late evening on June 25. It searched for the crew for the next few days. In the summer of 1944 submarines saved several crews of the shot down B-24s. Often pilots spent a few days in the water before the subs were able to discover the

³ F6F Hellcat. The first serial F6F took to the air on October 4, 1942. The first dogfight occurred on August 31, 1943. In 1943-1944 Hellcat became the main US deck fighter that bore the full weight of the air war in the Pacific Ocean. Hellcats remained on military duty in the US Navy throughout the entire Second World War.

⁴ F4U Corsair. Probably the best deck fighter of the Second World War; the Japanese were afraid of this plane the most. According to the US Air Force records 11 enemy planes were shot down for every downed Corsair. The longest lasting of all the fighter planes with reciprocating engines, it was produced from 1940 until 1953.

⁵ The US losses during the Yap mission: 33 airplanes, 110 people missing/dead, 30 saved.

⁶ Anthony’s crew (Don A. Anthony), B-24 #44-40571.

individual life rafts. It was Albacore's dispatch that helped identify the location of Coleman's wreck south of the old air strip and the harbor. Information from other sources, like the report about the course of the mission compiled by the crew of one of the planes belonging to the 5th bomb group, proclaimed that Coleman's crew "crashed just beyond the island's southern reef" and so it became clear that the search needs to be near the southeastern tip of the island.

THE SECOND EXPEDITION TO YAP, FALL 2006

Pat and Sherry returned to Yap Island in September 2006 fully resolved to search for uncle's crew and other Americans that died here during World War II. This time the team was joined by two other families of pilots that died on Yap. Again they worked together with Bill Acker and "Manta Ray Bay and Yap Divers." And again the constant questioning of the elders, trips into the jungle, searches in mangrove brush and dives into the waters around Yap Island.

The Ranfranz family became friends with Bill, his family and many of his employees. The atmosphere of coming back to the island was delightful. Bill, thanks to his position, opened many doors for the search crew on Yap. With the help of the dive guides, who also got imbued with the mission, an access to search the private territories of the northern island was obtained.

Pat left hundreds of pages of research on the island. Before that the Yapese had a very faint idea about where the catastrophes occurred and who died. Based on the Missing Air Crew project's historical research it is possible to restore the history of the times of war, associate the photographs of the lost American pilots with the metal remains of their planes that rested on the island or under water for over 60 years.

And again several exhaustive weeks of searches on land, in mangrove swamps, underwater. Three new American wrecks are discovered and numerous Japanese planes on land and in the water. Originally Pat did not pay any attention to some of the famous "Japanese". But by the end of the 2005 trip he started noticing that all Yapese and the rest considered all wrecks to be the remains of the Japanese military aircraft. Because America won the war it naturally seemed that Americans did not lose any planes on Yap (in reality the US lost 33 planes here)... While investigating the wrecks, the plane known to be the Japanese Zero was identified as an American one. This was an exciting discovery! A crash site of another Hellcat was also discovered – supposedly this was Holding's⁷ crew. His plane collided with another Hellcat above Yap on September 6, 1944 during the raid that set off from the American USS Enterprise CV-6. And again the relatives held remembrance services at the supposed location of the plane wreck. Pat received new materials for research. The B-25J #44-40598 is still not found and most likely lies in the depth that is still inaccessible.

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL!

In all Pat and Sherry spent more than a month on Yap during the last 2 years. How beautiful is the ocean! "My eyes constantly looked for planes but it was impossible not to notice the marine life," recalls Pat. "In my thoughts I often submerge near the southeastern end of the island and at the depth of 30 meters ask myself if this is true or dream. Had my uncle's plane not gone down underwater on that fateful day in June 1944 I most likely would never have visited Yap and dived in these wonderful waters."

PARTICIPATION

⁷ Holding's Crew (Ens. Howard A. Holding), F6F-5 Hellcat.

“Pat Ranfranz spoke to me in the summer 2005 when he was planning the first expedition to Yap. I am myself interested in history and respect the family ties and that is why his project to find the remains of the plane that his uncle flew during World War II immediately appealed to me. Pat and Sherry started sending various information to us not only regarding that plane but also about other American planes shot down above Yap during the war. I immediately instructed two of my employees to find out from the locals about the possible wreck locations in the jungle. The first expedition in 2005 revealed a lot.

In September 2006 Pat and Sherry returned to Yap with the family members of the other two American servicemen that died here. The employees of “Manta Ray Bay and Yap Divers” worked with the expedition the whole two weeks looking, diving, searching and describing the discovered planes along with organizing two memorial services in honor of the fallen.

We are proud that we could be useful in this honorable project and we are waiting for their next expedition and are ready to have all the resources of the hotel and dive center available to them. Firstly, the idea of helping families seek out the locations where their loved one had fallen is dear to us and secondly the discoveries and attempts to find new wrecks is a true adventure.” – Bill Acker, Manta man, the owner and manager of Manta Ray Bay Hotel and Yap Divers.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Pat Ranfranz is planning the next Yap expedition in 2008 believing that the location of the wreck is now identified with a large degree of certainty and that the plane is about 75-400 meters deep. Thousands of Pat's own dollars are invested into the project but the acquisition of the things most needed at this stage, side-scan sonar, metal detector, magnetometer and remote controlled apparatus is currently beyond his means. But the interest that the relatives of the fallen and the outside people are showing gives hope that the means will be found and the new expedition will finally discover the sunken plane – Coleman B-24 Crew.