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- Questions & Comments

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- Win Stuff
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- Movie listings
- TV Listings
- Sudoku
- Crosswords
- Newspapers in Education
- Dining Club Cards
- Restaurant Reviews
- Send Letter to the Editor
- Send story ideas
- Entertainment Calendar

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- Community Calendar
- School Lunches
- WI Public Notices
- Moments in Life

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- Coupon Bonanza
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- Home Front
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Man searching for uncle's World War II plane

By Chris Vetter
Chippewa Falls News Bureau

CHIPPEWA FALLS - Patrick Ranfranz grew up with a love of aviation, and he always was intrigued to hear stories about his uncle, John McCullough, who was on a plane shot down over the Pacific Ocean island of Yap during World War II.

The plane was declared missing June 25, 1944.

The stories stuck with Ranfranz, and he wanted to know what happened to that plane, his uncle and the other nine men aboard the B-24. The wreckage hasn't been recovered.

Much like the better-known island of Iwo Jima, Japanese troops defended Yap as long as they could, he said.

"It's a tiny island that took punch after punch after punch," Ranfranz said. "It was strategic for the island-hopping campaigns."

Ranfranz, 42, of Cameron grew up in Rochester, Minn., and attended UW-Eau Claire, where he earned a degree in history and a minor in anthropology.

During college, Ranfranz started making open records requests, and he pulled together documents about planes lost over the tiny island. His research shows that 33 U.S. planes were shot down.

"My goal has expanded to not just finding my uncle's crew but all the missing planes over Yap," he said.

Ranfranz made trips to Yap in 2005 and 2006. He will return Friday and stay through Oct. 15. His wife, Cherie, and three others are joining him to hunt for the lost warplanes.

They have new equipment this year, a side-scanning sonar. "It takes an image of the ocean floor as you tow (the scanner)," Ranfranz said.

"They use it to find bodies on a lake floor, for example. It can essentially map out the ocean floor and find a plane."

Ranfranz doesn't want to remove the planes - he considers them gravesites - but would like to see the bodies exhumed, returned to the United States and given to families who have long wondered what happened to their sons, brothers and uncles.

"We have the theory that we never leave a man behind," he said. "Well, we did."

The tiny island - Ranfranz said it's about 16



In 2006, Patrick Ranfranz of Cameron looked over what he believes to be the engine from a World War II Japanese plane off the island of Yap. Ranfranz plans to return to the island in the Pacific next month to look for more evidence of World War II crashes, including one that killed his uncle.

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miles long and four miles wide - is littered with small parts from crashed planes. The Yap people are accustomed to seeing pieces of planes, even now.

"They've grown up with wreckage in their jungle," Ranfranz said.

~~Ranfranz gets only personal satisfaction, not financial rewards, for his efforts.~~

With the use of textbooks, manuals and digests about the planes, he determines which type of aircraft he has uncovered.

Now that these textbooks have been scanned into computer files, he will be able to bring his extensive data on the trip.

"It's kind of a rush when you find out what (type of plane) it was and realize what happened to it," he said. "We'll be able to look at these parts and compare it to the digital books. We'll put the puzzle back together."

On previous trips Ranfranz and his team have uncovered seven planes. He believes that with the side-scanning sonar, he will have even more luck. "We're actually finding whole planes at times," Ranfranz said.

Each trip to Yap has cost the Ranfranzes between \$8,000 and \$10,000.

Ranfranz's Web site features letters from men who were aboard the planes and more information about where some of the planes were believed to have crashed. He said people probably don't realize that 78,000 servicemen killed in action during World War II haven't been found.

This time, Ranfranz hopes to find his uncle's plane.

"This is our best chance to find it," Ranfranz said. "I'm very optimistic."

Vetter can be reached at 723-0303.
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