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MIA HUNTERS PRESS RELEASE FOR JUNE 28, 2010

Hundreds of WWII MIAs, missing for 65 years, may soon be recovered and coming home from the jungles of Papua New Guinea


An all-volunteer force of MIA Hunters, predominantly Minnesotans, returned from a month of hazardous, deep jungle penetrations to authenticate the findings of their 14 Papuan scouts. The scouts had completed 20 months of jungle searching during which they reported locating a total of 92 crash sites of lost Warbirds and their aircrews, plus a burial mound of innumerable American, Australian and perhaps Japanese soldiers, killed in the final land battle near Buna on the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

Of the original 92 reported sites, over 50 were considered to be retrieval prospects with their MIA aircrews, which could reach 250 or more lost airmen. In the three years prior to the 2010 Missions, MIA Hunters have already found over 20 other lost crash sites in Papua New Guinea, raising the total recovery prospects to 400-500 airmen and soldiers. These discoveries are reported to the US Army's MIA recovery operation in Hawaii for follow-up retrieval of the MIAs. The reports are sent with pictures, GPS mapping locations and support data to be used with forensic testing to authenticate individual's identity and provide the ultimate return of their remains to their next of kin.

The MIA Hunters, 32 strong, were divided into four separate search mission groups; they were then split to make eight groups, each led by an experienced mission leader. They were comprised of Americans, Brits and Australians and included four women. They ranged in ages from 21-82, but most were senior citizens. Arguably the biggest search for MIAs by civilians ever conducted, the two-year planning project took all of May 2010 on location to complete.

Finding the lost aircraft crash sites where crewmen's remains may still lay buried can be poignant moments. A US flag is reverently placed at each site and a prayer is given for those who died there. The MIA Hunters treat each site as holy burial ground, leaving each as they find them, undisturbed by their presence. Each mission member is forbidden to remove anything from these crash sites, unlike others who view the wreckage as potentially profitable salvage. Further, no mission member is allowed to disclose the location of these crash sites for three years, giving the US Army exclusive opportunity to complete their MIA recovery effort.






Mission members endured tropical heat and torrential rain while traveling by four-wheel drive vehicles, in open boats or dugout canoes and, more often, by simply foot-slogging on precipitous paths or up challenging mountains. Crossing of crocodile infested rivers occurred daily, and one eight-foot python snake, which threatened one group, was killed, cooked and eaten for dinner. Two groups became stranded on mountain tops, one seeking shelter with native villagers who kept a fire going all night, and stayed watch until dawn. Puzzled by the additional security, their first white guests had been protected all night by the villagers because of a nearby Papuan prison break, as escaped prisoners were pillaging for food and supplies. Continuously the island lived up to its reputation as a place where anything can happen.

Throughout, mission leaders were in touch by satellite telephones with Missions Director Bryan Moon at an operations base in Popondetta and later in Lae. His job, with Curt Hills, Director of Mission Planning, while riding herd on all missions, was to settle differences with local villagers, provide rescue operations where necessary, and settle financial issues with scouts, village chiefs and landowners. The latter required them to twice appear at local police stations to resolve disputes, both of which were determined in their favor by the police chiefs. In the end, it was considered nothing short of miraculous that everyone returned home exhausted but relatively intact.

This is the 20th year of the MIA Hunters non-profit group, founded and led by 82-year-old Bryan Moon, who himself completed in May his 28th MIA search mission. His organization was recognized in 2009 by the US Department of Defense as the No. 1 most successful MIA search organization in the USA. This 2010 operation was their biggest, most expensive and most successful venture. All the mission members were volunteers. No one drew a salary. Each paid their own way and accepted all the risks of jungle exploration, knowing they would receive little or no recognition or thanks.

All Mission members attended two major pre-mission briefings. They were told that the jungle does not give up its secrets easily or willingly. They were to stay together, follow their mission leaders and forget any individual macho conduct. Life and medical evacuation insurance was mandatory, but safety of mission members was an absolute priority with mission leaders directed to abort a search if danger reached unacceptable levels. It is this discipline, active for 20 years of MIA Hunter operations, that has given the organization a 100 percent safety record. This was despite the fact that cholera had been added to the jungle's consistently threatening environment. Previous missions had faced malaria, snakes, scorpions, spiders, crocodiles, ninety-degree-plus temperatures and torrential rain all recalled in the Mission Director's repetitive understatement, "No one said it would be easy."





The four search groups were each abroad for 14 days, the first pair leaving USA on May 2 and the second pair on May 14. From Minneapolis to Los Angeles, they flew via New Zealand to Australia with one overnight to recover from the exhausting trip, then on to Papua New Guinea. Here they split, one group heading for Lae on the north coast of the island, the other to Popondetta, farther east on the same coast. With only one night in a hotel, they left immediately for jungle base camps from which their daily searches would operate. Sleeping in tents, their native cook prepared two meals daily, breakfast and dinner. There were no coffee or lunch breaks in between while the daily MIA searches were conducted.

MISSION CONCLUSION

The five-year plan, ending with the May 2010 search, was intended to explore a new strategy for finding MIAs in larger numbers. To do so, MIA Hunters built their plan on two basic ingredients, namely money and time. The money was generated from the participation fees paid by all Mission members. With this, time was purchased by hiring native Papuan trackers (for a period of 20 months) to search predetermined sections of the island's jungle where much of the WWII final conflicts between the allied forces and the Japanese had taken place and, therefore, where predominant casualties could be expected. The results speak for themselves, leaving open the question - if it works in Papua New Guinea, why not in Vietnam or Korea or other WWII major battle zones?

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