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## MIA Hunters success story

by Connie Bickman

The reunion was bittersweet as Michael Roy, a native of Papua New Guinea, and David and Carolyn Fox, Cannon Falls, met last week in Minnesota.

Michael was the MIA Hunters guide who located the downed B-24 Bomber and remains of David's cousin, WWII private Joseph Thompson, in the jungles of Papua New Guinea nearly ten years ago. Joseph and another crew member weren't scheduled on that fateful flight 65 years ago, but were filling in for sick airmen. The last known radio message from the plane was "Why aren't the lights on?" which indicated the crew had lost their way back to the airbase.

A personal search for the downed airman began decades later, when Joseph's daughter, Sandra Smith from Australia, who had never met her father, began the process of trying to locate his family. Eventually she tracked down his adoptive family in California and then launched a search for his birth family, which led her to Cannon Falls.

Joseph, the son of Elizabeth Miller, Cannon Falls, had been placed for adoption as a toddler. Sandra's search ultimately led her to David Fox, the grandson of Alma Cook, Elizabeth Miller's sister.

This is where Bryan Moon came into the picture, who in "a million to one coincidence," was the co-founder of MIA Hunters, and is also of Cannon Falls. MIA Hunters was founded by Bryan, a renowned artist and former Northwest Airlines vice-president, and his son Christopher from Shakopee. They have made 30 missions in the past 20 years to at least a dozen countries in search of missing American servicemen, and their services are offered free of charge.

When Sandra had located David and Carolyn, they decided to get involved in the search. As an American, Carolyn was able to access military information not available to Sandra. She also set up a web page. Eventually Christopher and Bryan heard of their search and contacted the couple, who lived in Bryan's own hometown. Carolyn gave Bryan all the information she and Sandra had gathered about Joseph from US, Australian and other sources, including the possible crash site, the Owen Stanley Mountain Range on the north side of Papua New Guinea. MIA Hunters had visited that area on a mission three years earlier, another coincidence.

Bryan enlisted the services of local native, Michael Roy, a former minister and accountant, who became MIA's on-site liaison, guide and interpreter. MIA provided the directions, maps and funds, along with specific orders not to disturb the crash site. Michael and his group of natives learned that an area village chief and his son had found the lost plane in 2002, and retrieved the dog tags of Robert E. Frank, a gunner on Michael's plane. Debris had been scattered and parts of the plane had been carried off by natives.

The search may have begun in 1982, but with the process of locating the downed plane by natives, the verification of the crash site by Michael, the recovery of the remains by a joint POW/MIA recovery team, and the final identification of Joseph and ten other airmen, it took until 2008 to complete. At that time the remains of the airmen were brought back to the US and buried in Arlington Cemetery in Washington, DC. Joseph's daughter, Sandra, his cousin David Fox and wife



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Carolyn, along with a niece from California attended that ceremony to put their relative to rest.

Michael Ray has worked with Bryan and MIA Hunters for 13 years now as their chief guide, and is currently the director of operations in New Guinea. He has been to Cannon Falls three times to receive instructions for upcoming missions and then to brief members going on these missions. But his visit last week was different. He was able to meet David and Carolyn Fox first hand.

"This was the first coming together of a Papua New Guinea scout and civilians, who benefited from his hard work in the jungles searching for downed planes and the remains of airmen," Bryan stated.

Michael, who is married and has four children, ages four to 18, actually met three Minnesota family members of WWII airmen he has located, and said it was very emotional to come together with these relatives, but added that it was also the best part of his trip to Minnesota.

Relatives he spoke of, David and Carolyn Fox, had a lot to say about his visit. David is vice president of BJA transport in Cannon Falls, and Carolyn works at Rapps (now Mileage gas station).

David and Carolyn told Bryan quite some time ago that it "would be so great" if they could meet Michael Roy, just to thank him. Last week Bryan called them and said he had a favor and a surprise. He went to their house and was just going to ask them to come to an event on Saturday, intending to surprise them with Michael at that time. But, as coincidence would have it, Sandy happened to call Carolyn from Australia, just as Bryan was walking up to the door. "So he had a chance to talk with Sandy also, and told us at the same time that Michael was right here in Cannon Falls and we were going to have the opportunity to meet him. It blew us away," Carolyn said.

"It was the most awesome thing finally to be able to meet the man who found David's cousin. We had dinner together, and there were a lot of tears, a lot of talk and laughter, and a lot hugs."

She added, "He was very quiet at first and we realized that he really didn't understand the complete impact of how the end result of what he does is so important to MIA families. We told him that through DNA analysis Sandy has been able to put her father's name on her birth certificate. That was important to her.

"Even since we buried Joseph, two years ago, she has discovered more family. A man had read her online information and contacted her. Through him she discovered a half-sister, who unfortunately had died in 2006, but that led to a whole bunch more family she never knew existed."

Michael humbly shared with them some details of locating the crash site. He told them that when he did his search, he left the village at 6 a.m., first taking a boat and then walking through the jungle. He said he was a little concerned because the village chief he was working with had a hard time finding the site because, with new jungle growth, the area had changed. When they finally located the crashed plane, Michael took photos and marked trees for the POW/MIA recovery crew who would come in later. He said he finally returned to the village at 7 p.m., after a grueling 13-hour day.

"It makes me feel proud that I am part of a team that found their lost relatives," he said, referring to MIA Hunters. Of his actual jungle searches, he says, "When we finally locate a crash site, it is exciting and sometimes emotional," adding, "but you have to be careful when you are uncovering aircraft, especially watching for snakes!" He says that along with bones and dog tags, they have found rings, and sometimes US coins.

Michael returned home this week to Papua New Guinea to prepare for the next MIA mission, which begins this month in the South Pacific. It will be done in phases, stretching through the month of May. This will be the biggest search for MIAs ever conducted by civilians.

There are 33 volunteers scheduled for this mission, including Bryan's two half-brothers from Australia, travelers from Britain and from the US. He noted, "95% of my volunteers over the years have been from Minnesota, including Dr. Karl Molenaar from Cannon Falls."



Volunteers pay their own way, and on this upcoming trip his group includes four women, one of whom is an 80-year-old seasoned traveler.

The volunteers will be split into ten groups covering highland mountains and jungle coastline in this search mission. They use local villagers for porters, communicate group-to-group via satellite telephones and have access to helicopter services in case of a crisis.

"We have ten high-priority targets we must get to," Bryan stressed, noting that time is their biggest enemy, and adding that they have at least ten more potential sites they would like to explore.

"MIA Hunters end mission is to discover missing in action air crews and soldiers and bring them home to rest, providing closure for the families," he stated. Families like David and Carolyn Fox.

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