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Jungle journeys yield fates long lost, but not forgotten

Sam Zell sounds off at convention of National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts
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John Rippinger is a thin, bespectacled 5-foot, 6-inch, 63-year-old who runs seven insurance-related businesses from Schaumburg.

In his free time, he rides motorcycles and is an aerobatic pilot; he flew one of the planes that buzzed over the Blackhawks parade. And through a group called MIA Hunters, Rippinger searches remote jungles for the remains of U.S. pilots missing in action.

Rippinger recently returned from a three-week, self-funded \$10,000 trip to Papua New Guinea. During World War II, the island of New Guinea was a critical theater, as the Japanese sought to use it as a base for an attack on Australia. For Rippinger, the island's critical ingredient is its nonacidic soil. Composed of volcanic ash, it has kept the remains of felled pilots somewhat intact for almost 70 years. The island is thinly inhabited by tribes speaking more than 1,000 languages, and in the most remote societies there is no word for "airplane." So a native scout paid by the MIA Hunters scours remote parts of the island asking villagers to lead him to any large pieces of metal. Once at a site, he snaps a photo.

When the MIA Hunters arrive, often years later, they search for the aircraft's bureau number to identify it, and then research whether the operator of that plane parachuted to safety or never came home. At crash sites, the team does not disturb the wreckage; it only plants a U.S. flag and says a prayer. On his most recent trip, Rippinger and his team located eight crash sites; two were believed to contain remains.

Information on Japanese crash sites is sent to the Japanese government, while GPS coordinates on Americans are sent to the Joint Prisoners of War, Missing in Action Accounting Command in Hawaii, where 425 staffers are working to bring home about 88,000 MIAs, according to the command's Web site.

Each retrieval of remains costs JPAC about \$1.2 million, said Rippinger said, who estimates there are 375 undiscovered wrecks in Papua New Guinea jungle.

Rippinger volunteers for these missions because in 1979 his brother, a Navy pilot, died in an in-flight collision 30 miles off the coast of San Diego. His remains were never recovered.