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MSU grad, New Ulm man become MIA Hunters



MIA Hunters founder Bryan Moon met with New Guinea villagers during his search group's mission to find World War II jungle plane crash sites. Submitted photo



Searchers and guides gather around a military aircraft downed in New Guinea in World War II. Of the more than 90 crash sites identified on the South Pacific island, more than 50 are considered to be the MIA resting places of about 250 lost airmen. Submitted photo



Marjorie Ploeger

Tom Berg



(<http://mankatofreepress.com/local/x1703944084/MSU-grad-New-Ulm-man-become-MIA-Hunters>)

Search group locates WWII crash sites in New Guinea

By Brian Ojanpa
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Marjorie Ploeger's description of boiled python?

"The taste is between chicken and alligator," said the 23-year-old spring graduate of Minnesota State University, who has returned from the South Pacific island of New Guinea with a heightened appreciation for those who died serving their country in World War II.

Ploeger was part of the largest-ever civilian search for MIAs — servicepeople missing in action.

The 32-member search group — Ploeger was one of four women — included 25 Minnesotans.

Ages ranged from 82-year-old mission leader Bryan Moon to Ploeger's 21-year-old brother Eric. New Ulm resident Tom Berg, 70, also made the trip.

Their two-week foray into steamy, dangerous, mountain jungles led to the identification of 92 plane crash sites plus a burial mound of innumerable American, Australian and Japanese soldiers.

Ploeger, a history buff, said she wanted in on the mission because she's always been moved by that war's saga and the horrific loss of life.

"I had no idea that there are still over 70,000 MIAs from World War II, and that's extremely unacceptable."

Ploeger began physical preparations for the experience months ago by running up Stadium Road hill near the MSU campus.

Group members pre-flight received more than a dozen inoculations to stave off disease, but Ploeger was unprepared for the jungle poison ivy she encountered.

“It literally made my skin boil. I still have scars.”

She also broke two toes climbing mountainous terrain eight hours a day, and another group member was attacked by a dog.

The aforementioned 8-foot python the group came in contact with was killed and cooked by a villager.

Ploeger said temperatures never dipped below 85 even at night and she trekked with a 30-pound pack at all times. Even so, she described the trip as an “awesome experience.”

Ditto for Berg, a history and aviation aficionado who said he was drawn to participate in the mission because of its unique challenge.

“It sounded like something very interesting to do,” he said. “It was one of those bucket list kind of things and I’m really glad I did it.”

When a crash site was found — searchers looked for those in lieu of human remains long gone — each was treated as holy burial ground and left undisturbed.

No mission member was allowed to take items from the sites nor disclose their locations for three years to give the U.S. Army time to complete its MIA recovery effort.

This is the 20th year of the MIA Hunters group founded by Moon and is regarded as the most successful MIA search organization in the United States.

Members paid their own way, accepted all risks of jungle exploration and received two extensive pre-mission briefings.

New Guinea, due north of Australia, was invaded by the Japanese in 1942 and became a key battlefield of World War II.



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