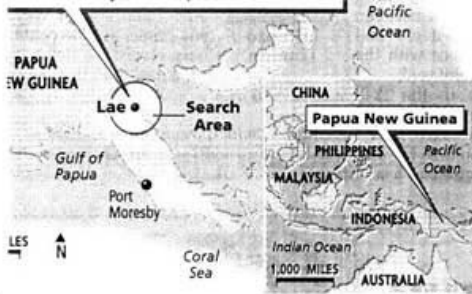


LOST, NOT FORGOTTEN

MIA Hunters, a Minnesota-based group started by a former Northwest Airlines executive, scours remote lands in search of the remains of American aviators missing in action during World War II.

BY MARICELLA MIRANDA
Pioneer Press

group MIA Hunters of Randolph, Minn., led 12 crash sites of missing aircraft from World War II this year in Papua New Guinea.



Chris Funke took a trip back in history this year to a place where so many lost their lives. He hoped to get closer to his father's memories of fighting in the South Pacific during World War II.

Funke, 46, of Minneapolis, and 21 other travelers made three separate visits in May and June to Papua New Guinea — a country known to have dozens of WWII crash sites with U.S. crew members waiting to be found.

That's where MIA Hunters, like Funke, come in.

"Our generation has not really had to sacrifice much. (The trip) was an opportunity to try and pay back the sacrifices

of (my father's) generation," Funke said Wednesday. "I wanted to experience what he and his friends in that generation experienced."

Funke's father served four years in the Navy during WWII. But his father often dreamed of joining the Army Air Corps, a predecessor of the Air Force.

"If he had made it in the Air Corps, we may be searching for him," he said.

MIA Hunters, which recruits travelers to search for WWII aircraft crash sites, located 11 sites with an estimated 20 crew members during its last missions to Papua New Guinea, said Bryan Moon, president and mission director for the group, which is based in the Dakota County community of Randolph.

MIA HUNTERS, 10B

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The sites had seven U.S. military aircrafts with an estimated eight crew members, and five Japanese bombers with at least a dozen crew members, according to the group.

Moon will prepare a detailed report for each crash, which he'll give to U.S. officials with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii. Investigators will search for the remains based on a priority list and return them to the United States for identification.

Details on the Japanese crash sites will be given to the Japanese government.

MIA Hunters does not dig up remains, Moon said.

Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Feeney, a spokeswoman from JPAC in Hawaii, said historians at JPAC are familiar with MIA Hunters. They were aware of their visits to Papua New Guinea.

There are 78,000 American MIAs of World War II, of which 35,000 are thought to be recover-

SEEKING AN MIA?

Those searching for American MIAs from World War II can contact MIA Hunters by calling Bryan Moon at 507-263-7050 or visiting www.miahunters.com.

able, reported JPAC. Those deemed unrecoverable were lost at sea, in some cases entombed in sunken vessels.

Many crew members were lost in Papua New Guinea on Black Sunday — April 18, 1944 — when bad weather led to 37 U.S. planes going down in the country's jungles.

Moon began using his pension as vice president of marketing for Northwest Airlines to help fund MIA Hunters and look for missing airmen for families free of charge. But 15 years of traveling left him with little choice but to charge those interested in accompanying him on the trips for their expenses. Travelers paid \$10,250 each to go to Papua New Guinea.

MIA Hunters has completed 19 missions in various countries. The group has found 57 airmen from the United States and elsewhere as well as a woman who was an American Red Cross worker. Four discoveries were Minnesotans.

But the rules for MIA Hunters haven't stop natives in Papua New Guinea from removing some remains, Moon said. Villagers gave Moon pieces from U.S. and Japanese aircrafts.

The natives also brought back human remains. Faced with the dilemma of abandoning the remains, Moon brought the bones back to the United States to give to investigators.

Villagers also told the group that 30 U.S. soldiers were executed and buried in an area of Papua New Guinea, and 10 Japanese soldiers were buried in a village. Group organizers say it's only a matter of time before the WWII generation dies and those stories are lost.

Bernie Friel, 76, of Mendota Heights, traveled on the third mission with MIA Hunters. The former city planning commissioner and retired attorney remembers being 11 years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked and 15 years old when World War II ended.

"I missed being in it by only

two years," Friel recalled.

After having a heart attack at the age of 38, Friel began traveling as a hobby. His group — the third trip Moon led — found crash sites with two Japanese and two U.S. aircrafts.

Friel stepped on a snake while hiking up a flowing stream. He also floated down a river on a slowly leaking, large inner tube with other travelers, as a guide directed them.

The last mission took a turn for the worse when Moon caught a throat infection, which made him so weak he couldn't walk and he was admitted to the hospital for two weeks in the United States.

Moon, 79, decided before leaving on the first trip that he wouldn't hike to the crash sites. In the future, Moon said he will plan the missions at home and let others do the traveling.

"I generally don't worry too much. I knew I was in trouble, but it would work its way out," Moon said. My "real concern is we're going lose somebody out there."