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### **PAST MISSIONS:**

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#### *MIA RECOVERY MISSION TO NEW GUINEA for Lt. Harold Wurtz, Jr.*

BY BETH KRODEL  
Free Press Staff Writer

Half a century ago and half a world away, a 21-year-old Army Air Forces pilot from Dearborn squeezed into a one-seat fighter plane with a young nurse for a wartime joy ride over the New Guinea jungle. That flight turned out to be the last for Lt. Harold Wurtz Jr. and Harriet Gowen, 28, of Stillwater, Minn. The World War II P47 Thunderbolt fighter took off from the Nadzab, Papua New Guinea, airfield May 12, 1945, and never returned. Despite an extensive government search, neither the plane nor the couple's remains were found.

But now, 52 years later, thanks to a father-son adventure team from Minnesota and a group of New Guinea villagers, the remains of Wurtz and Gowen could be coming home to be laid to rest. It may not be much of a homecoming for Wurtz, who was single and whose parents -- longtime Dearborn residents Harold Wurtz Sr. and Gretna Wurtz -- died, never quite sure of their son's fate.

His mother, who died in 1992 at age 96, had written several letters to the Army Air Forces pleading for more information on her son, whom she thought had flown alone the day he disappeared. In one letter dated Dec. 9, 1946, she wrote: "I guess you realize the mothers can never give up their boys that they love so much." In a note from May 25, 1950, she wrote: "I will never get over the loss of Harold until he is found. Are they still searching at all?"

Said Christopher Moon, 43, of Bloomington, Minn., on Friday: "If only she had lived five more years." He and his father, Bryan Moon, 69, of Frontenac, Minn., worked to find the remains. "How wonderful it would have been for her to find out what happened to her son."

In October, three New Guinea villagers on a wild-pig hunt discovered the plane's wreckage and, later, human bones and Wurtz's dog tags. Word of the find spread, eventually reaching a Minnesota missionary who told a Minneapolis radio reporter, who contacted the Moons. The father-son duo have been on more than a dozen overseas expeditions to uncover wreckage and human remains. The Moons, the elder a former Northwest Airlines vice

president and the younger an owner of a Minnesota-based technology marketing company, spent about five months researching Wurtz's flight. Despite discouragement from the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, which advises private citizens not to interfere with crash excavations, the Moons went to New Guinea last month to find the aircraft and remains. Instead of collecting them and bringing them back to the United States -- which may have negatively affected forensic work -- the Moons took photographs, drew maps and wrote reports detailing their findings. They sent that information to the U.S. Army on July 27. A spokesman for the identification lab said a government recovery team is expected to go to New Guinea later this month or in early September.

Little is known about Wurtz, other than he was born Sept. 23, 1923, grew up in Dearborn, attended Dearborn High School and entered the military in November 1943. No relatives could be reached. But Gowen's nephew, Ernest Peaslee of Stillwater, Minn., was getting dressed for church and listening to the radio when news of the discovery hit airwaves there Friday. "When they said a nurse and a pilot in a single-seater in New Guinea, I put two and two together," said the 68-year-old man who was 17 when his aunt disappeared. "This is unbelievable and fantastic. I just hope we'll be able to bring her home and have a burial." Peaslee said Wurtz was one of Gowen's friends during the war. "It was a case where a young pilot told a young gal, 'You want to take a ride in a fighter plane?' and she took him up on it. She was a fun-loving gal," he said. "It's something she would've done."