



---

[\(HOME\)](#)

### **PAST MISSIONS:**

Here you will find recounts of our current and most recent missions - successful or not - and the painstaking work that goes into them before before and after.

*[MIA RECOVERY MISSION #2 TO SICILY for Lt. Theodore Thompson.](#)*

MINNESOTA WW.11 MIA PILOT FOUND 58 YEARS AFTER HIS DISAPPEARANCE.

MIA Hunters Bryan and Christopher Moon, after a two-year search, have discovered Minnesota WW.11 Pilot Lt. Theodore Thompson who has been missing in action for 58 years. He was found in an unmarked grave in a small Sicilian town. His identity was authenticated after extensive interviews with local people which included an eye-witnesses to the crash, a woman who visually identified from photographs the MIA pilot and the caretaker of the cemetery who actually buried him.

The pilot, Lt. Theodore Thompson from Moorhead, Minnesota joined the Air Force at Ft. Snelling in December 1941. On July 10th 1943, flying an A.36 dive bomber in a formation of four aircraft, he dive-bombed a German column of trucks. It was the first day of the allied landing on that island. Lt. Thompson's aircraft, trailing smoke, was seen by another pilot Lt. Robert Fortney, to impact a hillside and explode. His body was never recovered. Lt. Thompson is survived by his widow, Virginia Thompson who never remarried and a daughter born in Rochester, MN just days before the pilot was posted overseas. A brother and sisters also survive him.

It was at the request of the Thompson family members that led the Moon's on their two-year long mission to find him. The search took two missions to Sicily. On their first mission, they were joined by their wives' Cicely and Dona Moon. Based upon intelligence gathered from Air Force archives, their target search area was a 500 square mile mountainous section in the center of the island. Despite an intensive and arduous ten days of searching, nothing was found of the missing pilot. The first break came on the last day when Cicely and Dona began to investigate eight local cemeteries surrounding the search area. This new line of investigation raised the prospect that Lt. Thompson could, in fact, be buried in a local cemetery.

The second break came after returning to the USA from the first mission. It had taken nearly two years to locate Lt. Robert Fortney, the only American eye-witness to the crash of Lt. Thompson. Finding him led to the recovery of the Air Force Post Mission Report for July 10th 1943, which identified, for the first time, the pilot's specific target area. This was a 20mile stretch of road between the towns of Canicatti and Riese in Southern Sicily, which

was packed with German trucks when Lt. Thompson's formation dive-bombed them on that fateful day. This new evidence narrowed their original 500 square mile search area to this specific 20mile stretch of road, which was only 15miles south, and outside the original search zone.

The Moon's arrived in Sicily on May 4th 2001 to begin the arduous process of finding and interviewing every Sicilian in the new target area. After a series of dead ends, a single interview led the hunters to the small town of Delia. Working with their Sicilian interpreter, Onofrio Prestifilippo, they located an elderly man who witnessed the actual crash of Lt. Thompson in 1943 and subsequently led the hunters to the crash site. The hillside location was consistent with the Air Force Post Mission Report. Interviews with other witnesses took the team to a hillside overlooking the crash site where another eye-witness was found. Remarkably, the elderly lady had seen Lt. Thompson's body after the crash and when shown photographs of him, was able to confirm with near certainty that the pilot was indeed Lt. Theodore Thompson.

Elated with this new supporting evidence, the hunters returned to the town of Delia to search city records for any reference to the missing pilot. At the town's Government Center, the hunters were intercepted by the city Police Commandant who inquired as to the purpose of their visit. After learning of their mission, he generously volunteered assistance and confirmed the crash of an American aircraft and the burial of the pilot in the town's cemetery. Following a series of telephone calls, the Police Commandant located and arranged a meeting with an elderly man who had knowledge of the pilot's burial site within the local cemetery. Under Police escort, the Moon's were led to the home of the cemetery's retired caretaker who shocked the hunters that it was he who had buried Lt. Thompson in 1943 and that the remains were there to this day. Yet another local citizen volunteered that his father had visited the crashed aircraft moments after the incident and his father had said the aircraft must have come from North Africa because grapes were found in the cockpit and in July there were no grapes in Sicily in July. Lt Thompson had indeed taken off from a US Air Force base in North Africa.

While Sicily has long been considered to be heavily Mafia influenced, the Moon's found only kindness, hospitality and generous concern to be of assistance. Typical was when local family members volunteered to hold a ceremony beside a makeshift cross bearing the pilot's name. The graveside ceremony, conducted in the rain by a local priest, included a trumpeter who played an Italian version of taps followed by a local elder who fired three shots over the grave. The Moon's then had the caretaker place earth from the graveside into two small porcelain containers for later presentation to the pilot's relatives. When the Moon's telephoned from Sicily to the pilot's widow and to his brother, they were exuberant over the news that after nearly six decades of being lost, Lt. Thompson had now been found.

The MIA hunters, Bryan, Christopher, Cicely and Dona Moon are a self-funded group with a web site at [www.pro5.com/mia](http://www.pro5.com/mia). Their objective to find history and MIA's lost in time has taken them over the last decade to Africa, China, Papua New Guinea and other distant locations resulting in ten out of eleven successful missions.

#### GPS HEADINGS:

The Sicilian town of Delia - 37° 21.40N. 013°55.70E. Altitude 1662 Ft.

Crash site - 37°22.48N. 013° 56.49E. Altitude 1662 Ft.

Grave site - 37°21.66N. 013°56.00E. Altitude 1664 Ft

*MIA SEARCH MISSION #1 TO SICILY for Lt. Theodore Thompson.*

SICILY - Expedition Summary

MIA hunters father/son Bryan and Christopher Moon and their wives Cicely and Dona, returned from the island of Sicily and their search for Minnesota WW.11 MIA pilot Lt.Theodore Thompson. The pilot had been flying an A-36 dive bomber on July 10th 1943 when his aircraft was seen by another pilot to crash and explode on a hillside south of the mountain top town of Enna in central Sicily. His body was not recovered.

The Minnesota search team left for Sicily on October 3rd and spent ten harrowing twelve hour days climbing precipitous 3000 foot hills in search of the MIA pilot's crash site which could then lead to the recovery of his remains. A number of significant leads have developed, all of which are being actively investigated by a supporting Italian search team member in Sicily and also here in the USA.

The Moon family was forced to make a premature return to Minnesota because of personal business developments affecting both father and son at home, this being their eleventh voluntary self-funded expedition in search of MIA's, missing wartime aircraft and other historical artifacts. The most significant lead comes from two farmer eye-witnesses who claim they saw an American aircraft crash near a hilltop and explode in July 1943. Asked how they remembered it was July, they replied that it was in their harvesting season which includes July. During a drive along rutted and muddy paths to reach the hill, the search team was confronted by four gunmen. Shots were fired and the unarmed Minnesotans circled around the gunmen to reach the hill from the other side. One of the team's interpreters reported that this was Mafia country, a fact that had become clearer to them earlier that day when they first met one of the eye-witnesses at an Italian veterans club in the town of Barrafranca. Asked to accompany and guide the search team to the hillside crash site near the town of Geracello, ten miles to the north, the eye-witness apparently concerned the American strangers would not bring him back to town, insisted he be accompanied by another veteran and that the team leave one of their members behind as a "hostage".

Consequently one of the two accompanying Italian interpreters remained in the veterans club pending the search team's return. As a result of substantial front-page news coverage in the island's Giornale Di Sicilia newspaper and other radio and television reports on the expedition, leads on reported crash sites began to develop daily and were still incoming as the team left for their return trip home, to be followed-up by an Italian team member. Briefings to the press and there subsequent publication included an offer of a one million lire reward but the Moon's (\$500.00 US) "To any person who can guide researchers to crash site of WW.11 A-36 aircraft AND to the remains of it's pilot Lt.Theodore Thompson, believed to between the towns of Enna and Caltanissetta." A telephone contact at the teams Enna hotel followed. Many leads pointed the team back to the hillside crash site near Geracello.

On their last day in Sicily, a newspaper contact reported a farmer with a wing from the crashed aircraft. The site again was the hillside near Geracello where the farmer's walnut farm was located. Upon inspection, the "wing" turned out to be an aircraft flap to dimensions coinciding with an A-36 aircraft, the type flown by Lt.Thompson. The flap had been cemented into a wall in the farmer's house and used as a shelf. Reportedly it had come

from the nearby crash site. The farmer agreed to having four sections of the flap removed for analysis back in the USA. If confirmed to be from an A-36 aircraft, this would authenticate the crash site as that of Lt.Thompson.

However, it would also expose another mystery as both eye-witnesses claim they saw the pilot parachute from the aircraft and drift over another hill before the crash occurred. Follow-up searching for the parachuted pilot was cut short by the teams's premature return to the USA but it ongoing by the Italian team member in Sicily. Similarly, at press time, analysis of the flap section was mailed to an aircraft authority in North Dakota for final authentication. The primary search area was immediately south of the town of Enna in central Sicily which was the team's base. This area is approximately 20 miles east to west and 25 miles north to south.

Later in the search, two new and more specific crash sightings developed, one 30 miles to the east in the foothills of Mount Etna and the other 40 miles to the west of Enna. But nothing came easy. Upon arrival in Sicily at the island's capitol city of Palermo, a gas delivery island strike was in progress. As a result, the rented U-Drive came with only half a tank of gas , enough to reach Enna and provide for a one-day search but not enough to get back to Palermo. Each day the fuel strike threatened to ground the team to a halt but they managed to find just enough to keep going.

A daily routine developed. Breakfast at 8.00am, briefing of interpreters at 8.30am, on the road by 9.00am, lunch if they were lucky, searching until dark, back to the hotel by 9.00pm, dinner at 10.00pm. Fortunately the Italians eat late. To cover more territory on the last day, the team divided into two pairs. Cicely and Dona questioned veterans in Enna and visited a cemetery where American war dead were recorded. A 41 page record of these names did not include Lt.Thompson. But it did generate leads to four other cemeteries all within the crash site area. Contact with these cemetery records is being followed-up. Two separate engine recovery claims also reached the team on the last day, only one of which they had time to investigate. At the first location, an aircraft engine, reportedly twelve cylinder (which would be correct for an A-36 dive bomber) was excavated from a river during a highway development twelve years ago. A pillar supporting the now complete highway stands on that spot but photographs of the engine were retrieved and have since been sent to North Dakota to determine if the engine is in fact, from an A-36 aircraft fitted at that time with an Allison engine. These aircraft later converted to a more powerful Rolls-Royce engine which transitioned it into the famous P.51 Mustang fighter.

Many of the leads were frustratingly inaccurate, either from interpretation or from over enthusiastic exaggeration on behalf of the contact. But all were thoroughly pursued. One contact claimed to have an aircraft section complete with serial number. If accurate, such a number would immediately authenticate the location. The search team's records included the pilot's serial number and that of his aircraft and its engine. It took half a day to establish that the reported serial number was nothing more than some indecipherable numbers on a crumpled section of metal. Key documents which located the general search area, had been recovered from Air Force archives over a year ago. These included the official Missing Aircraft Report of July 10th 1943. This document gave a longitude and latitude location of the A-36 crash site. However, this location was in conflict with other archival documents, specifically a report and map both by a Lt.Robert Fortney who was piloting another A-36 next to Lt.Thompson's aircraft on July 10th 1943. Despite this and although this location was 40 miles to the west of the general search area, the team, guided by maps and a GPS, explored the Missing Aircraft Report's crash location. The result was negative and no one in

the area knew of a WW.11 aircraft crash.

The following summarizes the ongoing investigations at press time. 1. Sections of the aircraft flap from the crash site at Geracello are awaiting analysis. 2. The search is ongoing for the pilot who parachuted from the Geracello crash site aircraft. 3. Visits to cemeteries and their 1943 records in the search area towns of Barrafranca, Caltanissetta, Pietrapertusa and Piazza Armerina are ongoing. 4. The engine taken to a US Air Force base near Catania is being followed-up. If this turns out to be a Allison engine from an A-36 aircraft, its crash site would be further investigated. 5. A second claim for an engine recovery which was reported too late to be investigated by the team before they left Sicily is being pursued. 6. Key to the finding of the crash site is making contact with Lt.Thompson's colleague pilot, Lt.Robert Fortney whose archival reports stimulated the whole search operation. Unfortunately, his report refers to "..approaching the target from the north...and went into a dive.." He does not indicate precisely the target which could dramatically focus attention to a much more defined search area.

Finding Lt.Fortney has been ongoing for the past eighteen months without success - until the day after the team returned from Sicily. Lt.Fortney has been located in a Florida hospital recovering from recent surgery and is expected to return to his home shortly. At that time, perhaps later this week, the Moon's plan to visit with the pilot whose input could change the whole direction of the search program and trigger a second expedition to Sicily.

Visiting the team in Sicily was Twin Cities KSTP-TV's traveling reporter Jason Davis and cameraman Mark Garvey whose exclusive television coverage of the Moon's expedition and subsequent developments will be aired shortly.