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'SOMEONE ELSE'S SON'

Islands yield some answers to families' WWII doubts

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STOCKTON – Doubts swirled over the decades, from the day the military uniforms arrived in French Camp with a casket filled with straw and bones.

The Stuart family never believed those remains were their boy, Wesley Stuart, a rodeo-loving teen who enlisted with the U.S. Navy during

World War II and was bound for adventures in the western Pacific.

"We always wondered," said Mary Ellen Roberts, who was 12 when her brother shipped out from home on Jan. 27, 1943.

He died Sept. 13, 1944, a month shy of his 21st birthday.

"He was such a good-looking boy," Roberts said. "My folks were just so heartsick."

Her brother's Avenger, a Navy torpedo bomber, was gunned down by enemy fire in the Palau Islands, 500 miles east of the Philippines. The plane's wreckage lay rusting in a jungle for more than 60 years before being discovered three years ago.

"I grew up with my mother saying, when the coffin came home, 'That is not my son. It's someone else's son,

► PALAU, back page, A12



Wesley Stuart was killed in 1944 when his plane was shot down in the Pacific.

Palau: Crews comb plane wrecks for answers

► **FROM PAGE A1** and I will take care of him.' She just knew in her heart that that wasn't my brother."

While DNA tests solved one mystery – the remains weren't her brother's – new mysteries emerged.

Whose remains did the Navy hand over to the Stuart family all those years ago? Whose bones were discovered three years ago?

Will Wesley Stuart ever be brought home?

For years, teams – including members from Sacramento, Woodland and Davis – have tramped into Palau's jungles and dived into waters off the island nation's coast to catalog at least 30 of the estimated 200 U.S. warplanes lying in ruin.

The military can't say how many Americans perished in Palau, where Japanese and Americans battled fiercely.

The Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii says 1,500 U.S. service members remain missing – about 1,000 of them probably lost at sea – at Palau, which is in the Caroline Islands.

"Palau is still one of the places that we go to on a pretty regular basis," said JPAC's spokesman, Army Maj. Brian DeSantis.

In all, 78,000 who served in World War II are classified as missing in action. In December, JPAC hired two more historians to help investigate service members missing from that war.

"It's absolutely about bringing these missing service members home and being able to return their remains to family," DeSantis said.

The wrecks are strewn across the archipelago. In one place, the wing of a U.S. warplane juts eerily from the soil. In reefy ocean shallows, fish dart amid submerged fuselages of the downed planes.

The juxtaposition of tragedy and paradise can sometimes be jarring, said Dan O'Brien, a Woodland man who has made six trips to Palau with a crew from BentProp, a band of friends brought together by their love of thrill-seeking. Historians, scuba divers and scientists have joined to pursue their fascination about World War II and to help bring closure to the families of those who are missing.

"For the most part, as far as what's salvageable, a crashed aircraft doesn't have a whole lot of value. So for the local population, the wrecks become landmarks. To them, it's a piece of junk," O'Brien said.

The debris, however, is much more than that. It represents history, stories and lost lives. For some families looking for answers, the wrecks represent opportunities to find them.

"It's a jigsaw puzzle. You're provided with a lot of miscellaneous pieces that seemingly have no pattern, no connection," said O'Brien. It takes sleuthing to put the pieces together, he said.

Volunteers cull records, some provided by the military or gleaned from documents stored by the National Archive. They dig into history.

"It's hard not to get involved. It's easy to get sucked into it," said Peter Galli, a Sacramento freelance photographer and videographer who joined one expedition in 2004 and is looking forward to taking part in more.

During an expedition three years ago, BentProp volunteers discovered the wreckage of Stuart's Avenger scattered over a hillside of ferns and trees known as "Bloody Nose Ridge" on the island of Peleliu. The tail number – 16956 – was clearly visible and allowed the wreck to be identified as that of Stuart's ill-fated plane.

The team also found bones. JPAC dispatched a team to recover the remains.

That's when Roberts decided to find out whether the bones entombed in French Camp were really her brother's.

"I spent \$11,000 of my own money. Now, at least I have my answer. I grew up wondering: 'Are you my brother, or are you not?'" said Roberts, who now lives in Stockton.

On a hallway wall, she hangs the American flag, neatly folded into a triangle, that the military gave her family. There are pictures of her brother, including one of him with his three-man crew posing in front of a Navy warplane.

The remains discovered three years ago in Palau have yet to be identified. For Roberts, there is no rush.



▲ PUZZLING OUT THE MYSTERY:

Mary Ellen Roberts of Stockton displays a flag honoring her brother, Wesley Stuart. A search crew has found the ruins of his airplane, shot down in World War II.

Autumn Cruz/acruz@sacbee.com

► TRACKING DOWN CLUES:

Members of the group BentProp mark the discovery of Wesley Stuart's plane, which crashed on the Palau Islands in the Pacific in 1944. The remains have yet to be identified.

Clem Major/lastlighthome.org

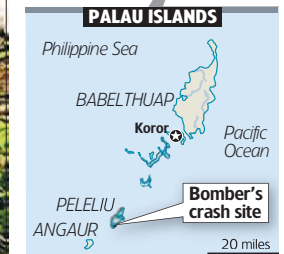
She already has many of her answers.

There is no question her brother perished, she said.

"As far as I'm concerned, I have closure," she said. "I'm satisfied that a wrong has been righted."

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Map data: ESRI Sacramento Bee