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Search group locates WWII crash sites in New Guinea



MIA Hunters founder Bryan Moon, 82, met with New Guinea villagers as they set out to find planes downed during World War II battles.

Submitted photo

CNHI News Service

MANKATO, Minn. -- New Guinea, due north of Australia, was invaded by the Japanese in 1942 and became a key World War II battlefield. Many men died there, and many remain there.

To some they might be forgotten casualties of war. But not to Marjorie Ploeger, a recent 23-year-old graduate of Minnesota State University, and others in the 32-member search group that spent a two-week foray into the steamy, dangerous, mountain jungles on the South Pacific Island.

The largest-ever civilian search for MIAs – servicepeople missing in action since World War II - identified 92 plane crash sites in New Guinea 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."

Group members received more than a dozen pre-trip 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."

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

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."

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 82-year-old mission leader Bryan 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. But nothing quite prepared them for when they were confronted by an 8-foot python. It was killed and then cooked by a villager.

"The taste is between chicken and alligator," Ploeger said.

Information for this story was provided by The Free Press in Mankato, Minn.

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Searchers and guides recently found 92 down aircraft on the South Pacific Island. More than 50 are considered to be the MIA resting places of about 250 lost airmen.

Submitted photo

By Tom Lindley at Jun 30 2010 - 9:50am | [News](#) | [Login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

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