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Kansas Aircrew Brings WWII Comrades Back From Watery Grave

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AIRAI, Palau, March 12, 2008 – A drama unfolded in the skies above the western Pacific island nation of Palau on Sept. 1, 1944, as intense fighting between American and Japanese forces was getting under way. During a raid, comrades of the U.S. Army Air Forces looked on helplessly as the crew of a B-24 Liberator bomber, the Babes in Arms, was brought down by anti-aircraft fire. Three of the crew reportedly bailed out, one without a parachute, before the bomber dove headlong into the ocean never to be found -- or so it was thought back then.



U.S. Navy divers hand Master Sgt. Matt Miltz, of the 190th Air Refueling Wing, Kansas Air National Guard, a sealed case containing remains of U.S. B-24 crewmembers shot down during World War II off the western Pacific island of Palau. Miltz placed the case and another like it in the cabin of the KC-135 tanker that flew the remains to Hawaii for identification.

A volunteer Kansas Air National Guard crew in a KC-135 Stratotanker from 190th Air Refueling Wing returned the human remains recovered from that ill-fated bomber back to this country in early March.

Thanks to an organization called BentProp, who found the crash site in 2004, the location is no longer a mystery. BentProp is a privately funded organization that searches for planes and their crews who crashed after being shot down by the Japanese in 1944-45. They reported it to the Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command, who for the last three years investigated and recovered the remains from the site. The Kansas Coyotes had the honor of transporting the fallen back to U.S. soil -- to Hawaii for identification.

“That seemed like a pretty good thing to do to give some closure to some families back home in the states,” Air Force Master Sgt. Mark Mertel said, adding that it was an honorable thing to do and “a fine way to end my career with the Kansas Air Guard. I jumped on it. It’s a great opportunity.”

The Kansas crew flew from its home at Forbes Field, just outside Topeka, to Hawaii then Guam and, from Guam, another hour and a half to the Republic of Palau.

“It was really moving to see that island and kind of imagine what might have happened that day,” Maj. Jeff Warrender said from the pilot’s seat. “It really made me think about how brave those guys must have been and what they might’ve gone through before they died. To see how beautiful the island was, it was just kind of eerie.”

Warrender first did a flyover inspection of the destination, a short airstrip with no tower that is usually used by smaller aircraft, in order for the crew to ensure conditions on the runway would permit a safe landing. Standing water, among other conditions, might keep the lumbering tanker from landing. Satisfied, Warrender circled back around, smoothly touched down, and brought the big plane to a quick halt on the island nation.

Local officials, without whom any of the Palau recovery efforts would have been possible, met the KC-135 crew on the runway. Jennifer Anson, executive assistant to the vice president of Palau, said the event was emotional for her. “A lot of my relatives were here during the war, and a lot of them went missing and we never found them,” she said.

“I’m happy for whoever’s family has that peace of mind now, knowing that their family members are being returned back home,” Anson added.

U.S. Navy divers sat in the back of a large truck with their cargo: two sealed black cases containing the remains of the B-24’s lost crew. These divers, dispatched by Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command to this site, spent a month and a half under 70 feet of water meticulously recovering the remains and, in some cases, personal effects of the bomber’s crew.

When BentProp personnel find a site, they tell JPAC, and an investigation is begun involving archaeologists, doctors, forensic scientists, divers, and whoever else is required to recover and identify a servicemember so that a family might be notified and the remains appropriately honored.

At the tanker, Air Force Capt. Jarrod Ramsey, a pilot, and Master Sgt. Matt Miltz, a refueling boom operator, carefully helped the divers, who handed the cases up from the truck into the side cargo door of the KC-135. Other members of the crew got the aircraft ready to fly again, checking and rechecking its structure and systems.

At the end of the runway, the engines whined louder and louder about not going anywhere as the pilot let their power build. Finally, the pilot released the brakes, and the tanker rocketed down a rapidly shortening runway and into the Pacific sky with the remaining crew of the Babes in Arms finally on their way to completing a trip that took much longer than anyone would have imagined.

After a quick stop back in Guam, the KC-135 flew east to Hawaii, where the remains of the B-24 crew would be examined forensically by JPAC experts to verify their identities. Once identified, the servicemembers will be flown the rest of the way home to their families, but that honor will be for another aircrew. The Kansas Coyotes had accomplished their mission.

"We've had some fairly long days, and not a lot of ground time," Miltz explained. "But it's all been worth it, helping to bring these people back."

(Army Staff Sgt. W. Michael Houk is assigned to the National Guard Bureau.)